HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. THERESA MAY, MP, JUNE 2017)
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- Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Minister for the Commonwealth and the UN)
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20 February 2018
House of Commons

Tuesday 20 February 2018

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Middle Level Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended, opposed and deferred until Wednesday 28 February at Four o’clock (Standing Order No. 20).

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Turkey (Afrin)

1. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): Whether he has made representations to his Turkish counterpart on that country’s operation in Afrin.

   **Grahame Morris**: Does the Foreign Secretary recognise that the Kurdish-led Administration in Afrin has built a secular, democratic system that has worked collaboratively with the international community to defeat Daesh, most recently in Raqqa? Does he accept that the international community owes a debt of honour to the Kurds? Will he step up efforts to stop the bloodshed in and around Afrin?

   **Sir Alan Duncan** (Middle East): The Foreign Secretary has spoken to Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu about the operation in Afrin. We have called for de-escalation for the protection of civilians, while recognising Turkey’s legitimate interest in the security of its borders. It remains in our shared interests to focus on achieving a political settlement in Syria.

   **Grahame Morris**: Does the Foreign Secretary recognise that the Kurdish-led Administration in Afrin has built a secular, democratic system that has worked collaboratively with the international community to defeat Daesh, most recently in Raqqa? Does he accept that the international community owes a debt of honour to the Kurds? Will he step up efforts to stop the bloodshed in and around Afrin?

   **Sir Alan Duncan**: I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but we must also recognise the legitimate security interests of Syria. They consider that, having launched Operation Olive Branch in January, it is in response to attacks from the Afrin area, and they believe that they are in compliance with proper UN standards.

   **Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): When we make representations to our Turkish NATO allies, can we also make representations on behalf of the tens of thousands of journalists and others who have been locked up by the Turkish Government?

   **Sir Alan Duncan**: I can assure my right hon. Friend that we do, and we do so in all our meetings at all levels with our Turkish counterparts.

   **Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): Do the Government agree that the Democratic Union party—the PYD—and the People’s Protection Units—the YPG—should be included in the Geneva process to end Syria’s war and discuss the country’s future?

   **Sir Alan Duncan**: That is primarily a question on Syria, rather than Turkey. However, I would point out to the right hon. Lady that the PKK is a proscribed organisation in the UK, whereas the organisations to which she principally refers are not and so can be spoken to.

   **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Minister make representations to the Turkish Foreign Minister to ask the Turkish navy to cease obstructing vessels seeking to extract hydrocarbons in the eastern Mediterranean?

Girls' Education

2. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the delivery of girls’ education throughout the world.

9. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the delivery of girls’ education throughout the world.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): Girls’ education is a moral imperative. Women and girls have the right to be educated, equal, empowered and safe. This is one of the Foreign Secretary’s top priorities, and he has instructed his officials to put girls’ education at the heart of their work.

David T. C. Davies: Given the appalling revelations about some employees in Oxfam and the subsequent attempts to cover that up, could the Minister assure us that any organisation that is asked to deliver education for girls’ programmes anywhere in the world by the British Government is fit for purpose?

Harriett Baldwin: I share my hon. Friend’s assessment that this is an utterly despicable example. I hope he agrees that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has shown real leadership by writing to all the organisations with which we contract to ensure that safeguarding levels are raised. I believe that you have allowed her to make a statement on this subject later this afternoon, Mr Speaker.

Craig Tracey: During the Foreign Secretary’s recent trip, what discussions did he have with Burma, Thailand and Bangladesh on the Government's policy on the education of women and girls?

Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary champions this issue at every opportunity, including the opportunity that my hon. Friend mentioned. He will be aware that not only has my right hon. Friend shown tremendous leadership on this issue, but he has appointed a special envoy for gender equality and has really put this work at the heart of the diplomatic network.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Khwendo Kor provides education at the north-west frontier province of Pakistan, an incredibly dangerous environment for women and girls. UK Friends of Khwendo Kor tries to bring people over to the UK to provide human rights support, but the Home Office often blocks them. What discussion has the Minister had with the Home Office to help this situation?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the important work that a range of different organisations do, often in partnership with us. If she has specific examples on which she would like me to make representations to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, I would be delighted to receive her correspondence.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to the previous question, what discussions has the Minister had with the Government of Pakistan on the education of girls in that country? Can she tell the House what proportion of UK aid to Pakistan goes towards the education of women and young girls?

Harriett Baldwin: It is certainly very significant. Last month, I had the pleasure of meeting two very impressive education Ministers from different parts of Pakistan. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, education is quite devolved across different parts of Pakistan. As for the specific statistics that he wishes me to provide, I will follow that up in a letter to him.
David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome the work that my hon. Friend and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are doing in this field, but does she agree that in a place such as Africa, a huge amount more needs to be done?

Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a huge amount to be done. Something like 136 million girls around the world are not in education. We all know the importance of education, and we know that if girls are educated they can fulfil their potential.

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight a particular example that illustrates the challenges faced by girls around the world. The UK Government have demonstrated significant leadership on this issue as a way of progressing peace and development around the world, and are urging all parties to the conflict in Yemen to make a political solution.

New Channel Link

3. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Whether he has had discussions with his French counterpart on the construction of a new fixed link across the channel.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): At the conclusion of the highly successful Anglo-French summit, it was indeed agreed that a committee of wise people, or “comité des sages”, should be established to look at reviving the great tradition of UK-France collaboration in such matters as security, defence, space, genomics, infrastructure, and indeed, infrastructure projects, such as the idea of a new connection between our two countries—an idea, I can tell the House, that was warmly welcomed both by my counterpart, Mr Jean-Yves Le Drian, and by President Macron himself.

Patrick Grady: I note that the Foreign Secretary did not say whether he would be on this committee of wise people. He will be aware of the warning from Maritime UK and many others that the channel ports face gridlock if a transition arrangement for Brexit is not put in place urgently. What is the point of a 20-mile bridge if there is going to be a 20-mile queue waiting to get on to it?

Boris Johnson: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on crowbarring Brexit into that question. Most people appreciate that the existing channel tunnel is likely, at the current rate, to be full within the next seven years, which is a very short time in the lifetime of a great infrastructure project. It is a curiosity that two of the most powerful economies in the world, separated by barely 21 miles of water, are connected by only one railway line. I think that is a matter for legitimate reflection by our two countries on the way forward.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): With regard to links across the channel with France and many other European partners, yesterday the Exiting the European Union Committee heard evidence from Michel Barnier, Guy Verhofstadt and many others, and it is absolutely clear that the deep partnership we are seeking with the European Union will be a unique and specific agreement that will benefit those on both sides of the channel enormously. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that that should be the outcome of the talks that will be starting again soon?

Mr Speaker: Order. On the subject of crowbarring, or indeed shoehorning, I remind the Foreign Secretary—I am sure that he requires no reminding—that the question is not about Brexit; it is about a fixed link across the channel. That is the pertinent matter upon which he will focus.

Boris Johnson: If I may say so, I think that my hon. Friend has hit upon the notion of a metaphorical fixed link: a great, swollen, throbbing umbilicus of trade—I will not say which way it is going—with each side mutually nourishing the other. I very much approve of the note of optimism that he strikes.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I am generally in favour of building bridges rather than walls, but may I urge the Foreign Secretary, instead of indulging in fantasy engineering projects, to focus on the important work, which he just mentioned, of building metaphorical bridges with nations that share our values, such as France and other European neighbours, in order to prevent Brexit Britain from becoming isolated and increasingly reliant for trade and influence on regimes that have dubious human rights records?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Lady makes an important point, but she will recognise that we are beefing up our diplomatic representation in the EU and seizing the opportunity to build new links and revive old partnerships around the world. Nobody could have been more eloquent about our unconditional commitment to our friends and partners in the EU than the Prime Minister was in Munich last week.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): In 1971, when French and English counterparts started talking about the channel tunnel, they were mocked. Can we have more vision and less mockery about ideas on how we can take forward our future relationships?

Boris Johnson: I remind those Opposition Members who have been jeering from a sedentary position about great infrastructure projects that it has invariably been Conservative Administrations who have come forward with these schemes. It was the Conservatives who revived the east end of London with the Canary Wharf project, and it was Margaret Thatcher who green-lighted the first channel tunnel.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is estimated that the Foreign Secretary’s channel bridge could be built at a cost of £120 billion. He wants
to build bridges, but at the same time he is pushing for a hard Brexit, pushing us further away from the European Union. Does he think that that money could instead be better spent over the next six and a half years by giving the national health service £350 million a week? Which would he prefer?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is possibly too young to remember, but when the first channel tunnel was commissioned it was the vision of the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, that it should be entirely privately financed, and there is no reason why we should not have the same ambition this time. As for his point about the Brexit dividend, as the Prime Minister has herself said, there will unquestionably be substantial sums of money available for spending in this country on the priorities of the British people, including the NHS. If Labour Members are opposed to that, let them stand up and say so now.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Can the Foreign Secretary tell us about any economic analysis that he has had done on the infrastructure that he is talking about, and tell us where it sits in relation to giving the Government’s new Mad Max dystopian barometer?

Boris Johnson: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I defer the economic analysis to the committee—the committee of wise people. However, the first channel tunnel will be full within the next few years, by the middle of the next decade. I think it incumbent on us to be responsible enough to reflect on the future development of our economies, and I look forward to the committee’s findings.

Stephen Gethins: Does the Foreign Secretary agree with me about the importance of evidence from impartial civil servants? Does he agree with me that evidence in terms of our relationship with France and the rest of Europe is important, and, in that context, does he agree with the former First Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), about the “problem of politicians who won’t accept evidence”?

Boris Johnson: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I have nothing but admiration for the hard work and dedication of the Whitehall civil servants who are preparing the Brexit negotiations. Believe me, they are doing a superb job.

Illegal Wildlife Trade

4. Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle the illegal wildlife trade.  [903892]

13. Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle the illegal wildlife trade.  [903901]

The Secretary of State for Commonwealth and Foreign Affairs (Boris Johnson): The United Kingdom will host an ambitious, high-level illegal wildlife trade conference in London in October this year. I believe that the ambition to crack down on the illegal wildlife trade is shared by the entire British people.

Mr Jack: At that conference, will my right hon. Friend ensure that the United Kingdom remains at the forefront of efforts to stamp out the illegal trade in ivory?

Boris Johnson: As my hon. Friend will know, we are nearing the conclusion of a consultation about a total ban on ivory, which I think many people in the House and in the country would agree is devoutly to be wished for. We will see where we get to, but I think my hon. Friend can count on us once again to be in the lead, and I believe that the October summit will produce some very substantive conclusions on saving elephants.

Mrs Trevelyan: During his recent trip to south-east Asia, what discussions did my right hon. Friend have with palm oil-producing countries about the illegal wildlife trade and deforestation?

Boris Johnson: I am acutely aware of the problems caused by palm oil cultivation. We are in urgent dialogue with our partners to discourage them from deforestation and the consequent loss of species.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): China has come a long way in the ivory trade discussions, but what discussions is the team having with Vietnam and some of the other countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations?

Boris Johnson: Only the other day, I had discussions with Thailand. We absolutely appreciate the importance of not simply diverting the flow of ivory from China to other countries in south-east Asia.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): What steps the Government are taking to encourage dialogue between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Government of Iraq.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage dialogue between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Government of Iraq.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I was able to meet with both Prime Minister Abadi and Kurdish Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani in Munich at the weekend, when on behalf of the UK I encouraged the continuing dialogue recently begun between them individually, which is essential to the long-term stability of Iraq. We have no current plans for observers from the UK to attend May’s elections, but we are working with others to ensure efficient and effective monitoring.

Iraqi Elections

5. Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Whether the Government plan to send observers to the elections in Iraq scheduled for May 2018. [R]  [903893]

11. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage dialogue between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Government of Iraq.  [903899]
Jack Lopresti: Will British diplomats study the Federal Government’s progress in implementing the Iraqi constitution, especially in disputed areas like Kirkuk, where there have been reports of murder, looting and expropriation, and where the autonomy promised under the Iraqi constitution is under threat?

Alistair Burt: There is no doubt that both sides see the opportunity under the constitution to ensure that the relationships between them are strong and good. There has been a great deal of conciliation in an area that could be one of much greater conflict, and the UK is encouraging that dialogue to minimise the risk of the issues that my hon. Friend raises.

Robert Halfon: Will my right hon. Friend accept the Foreign Affairs Committee’s observation that many Kurds feel imprisoned in a country they see as not implementing the commitment to equality for them? Does he also agree that the five month-long blockade of international flights to and from Kurdistan has been a needless outrage, separating families, obstructing medical treatment and impairing the economy, and will he encourage Baghdad to lift the blockade?

Alistair Burt: The issue of the airport is foremost in the discussions between the respective Prime Ministers, and there is a recognition that if the arrangements for the airport could be changed, that would make a difference. It is essential for the future of a Kurdish region in Iraq that it is stable and secure and that rights are honoured on both sides, and that the constitution is seen to be effective.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I have just returned from Iraq, and I monitored the first ever elections in Iraq. Elections are important, and the Iraqis in particular would like more technical assistance and advice. They are doing a good job there at the moment, but they need more UK help to bring about reconciliation and progress between the various factions.

Alistair Burt: I thank the right hon. Lady for her steadfast support of Iraq over many years. Indeed, she and colleagues from the Inter-Parliamentary Union were over there to talk to those in the Iraqi Parliament about governance issues, and the contribution she has made over many years is immensely valuable. Of course, technical assistance from the UK to assist in this process is part of the support we provide, and I will certainly be looking into what more we can do in relation to the elections.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I know the Minister to be a fair-minded man, so when any of these negotiations are taking place, will he balance loyalty as allies of the Kurdish people over many long years with the track record of President Erdoğan?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and the Americas referred to the Turkish issue earlier. Certainly there is concern about what is happening on the border and a recognition that the needs of the Kurdish peoples, who are represented by a number of different parties, should be recognised. The UK is always conscious of the relationship we have with those peoples, and with the people of Iraq.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My right hon. Friend is a noted expert on the region, and it is a pleasure to see him representing Her Majesty’s Government in the middle east, but can he bring a little clarity, which the FAC asked for, on the difference between the YPG and the PKK? We received evidence after evidence that there is indeed no real difference, yet Her Majesty’s Government are supporting a group that appears, at least slightly, to be linked to a group that, as my right hon. Friend’s colleague the Minister for Europe and the Americas said just now, is a proscribed organisation.

Alistair Burt: I thank my hon. Friend not only for his question but for his leadership of the FAC, and we will study its report carefully. It asked for clarity in some situations in which it is genuinely difficult to provide clarity. There will be a full written response from the Foreign Office in due course, but we do designate the PKK as a proscribed organisation; that is the situation at present.

Syria: Chemical Weapons

6. John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): What evidence has his Department received on the recent use of chemical weapons in Syria.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): We are deeply concerned by recent reports of chemical weapons use in Syria. UK officials are in contact with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, which is investigating. We condemn all use of chemical weapons and are working with international partners to identify and hold to account those responsible.

John Woodcock: I thank the Minister for that answer. Anyone who seeks to draw a false equivalence in relation to Syria’s grotesque gassing of its own citizens risks aiding and abetting that gruesome activity. The Government’s concern is not enough, and words are not enough. What is the UK actually going to do to take action to stop this activity? This was supposed to be a red line for the international community, but it has been walked over time and again.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman is right to express concern and anger not only about the use of chemical weapons but about their increasing use. We think that they have been used on perhaps four occasions since the turn of this year. If the use of chemical weapons once again becomes the norm in war, that will go against a century of a united response against them by the world. I took part in the recent conference in Paris led by the French Foreign Minister and the United States Secretary of State to counter activities in the UN, where the joint investigative mechanism has been vetoed on three occasions, by trying to create some other mechanism. We will continue to work through the UN to ensure that the international convention on chemical weapons once again becomes properly effective.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his responses on this subject, but 2018 has proved to be an absolutely brutal year so far for Syrian civilians. What can we do? We can put in place monitoring in that country. Will the Minister tell us a little more
about what UK Government resources are available for monitoring and collecting evidence of these terrible crimes?

Alistair Burt: Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, the UK has been working to equip civilians on the ground with the tools they need to collect evidence that can be used to ensure accountability and justice. We have been doing that work for some years, and we will continue to do it. The hon. Lady has called attention to the increased use of chemical weapons in the past few weeks, which is an outrage. The world community is entitled to be outraged by it, and we must ensure that, through the UN, we do something effective to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Middle East

7. Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Development on supporting the creation of an international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Alistair Burt: The UK has been working to equip civilians on the ground with the tools they need to collect evidence that can be used to ensure accountability and justice. We have been doing that work for some years, and we will continue to do it. The hon. Lady has called attention to the increased use of chemical weapons in the past few weeks, which is an outrage. The world community is entitled to be outraged by it, and we must ensure that, through the UN, we do something effective to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): The United Kingdom supports the concept of an international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace. The Department for International Development’s people-to-people programme has similar aims, and brings together individuals from both sides to build support for a durable solution. We also remain concerned about the provision of healthcare in Gaza, and we are urging all the parties to take the necessary steps to improve conditions there.

Luciana Berger: I think the Minister for his response. With the UK’s increased commitment to funding coexistence projects in Israel-Palestine, which many on both sides of the House have long supported, we have an opportunity to lead the way on the global stage. Will he therefore pledge the UK’s diplomatic support to help to create that international fund, to ensure that our funding is matched by others as part of a sustainable international initiative to build the peace in the middle east that we all long for?

Alistair Burt: Many of us have worried over the years that one of the worst aspects of the conflict has been the separation of peoples. To that extent, we are following the concept of the development of this fund very carefully, and I will continue to take a strong personal interest in it. The sentiment behind it is exactly why we have the £3 million programme, but we will be watching the development of the international fund and giving it support where we can.

Alex Cunningham: A couple of weeks ago, I was humbled to meet a group of young Palestinians and listen to their personal stories about the restrictions on healthcare. A report from the World Health Organisation states that 54 patients died in 2017 while awaiting exit permits to get medical treatment outside Gaza. Will the Minister press Israel to remove the restrictions on patients, to prevent more Palestinians from dying while waiting for medical treatment?

Alistair Burt: The circumstances in Gaza remain dire in many ways. The free movement of patients and medical personnel is vital to the effectiveness of care. We regularly raise concerns about ambulance and permit delays with the Israeli authorities, and we will continue to do so.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Since September 2015, some 58 Israelis and four foreign nationals have been murdered by Palestinian terrorists in more than 400 separate stabbing, shooting and car ramming incidents. The terrorists have been rewarded with honorary titles, monthly salaries and other opportunities. Will my right hon. Friend make it clear to the Palestinian Authority that, until such time as glorification of terrorism ends, there can be no peace in the middle east?

Alistair Burt: As my hon. Friend is aware, we continue to condemn incitement and violent activities in the region at all times. The attacks that he mentions are absolutely not conducive to peace and should not be celebrated. However, the context of the situation means that we must continue to work for an end to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, because only when that happens will the seeds of conflict be taken away. In the meantime, we unreservedly condemn all terrorist and violent attacks.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): After the US halved its funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency last month, President Trump explained the decision by saying that the Palestinians “disrespected us...by not allowing our great vice president to see them...that money is not going to them unless they sit down and negotiate peace.”

May I ask the Minister to state, on behalf of this House, that extorting the Palestinian Authority to bend to US demands that the Palestinians negotiate peace. In the meantime, we unreservedly condemn all terrorist and violent attacks.

Alistair Burt: The actions of the United States Government in this case have nothing to do with us. Our view on UNRWA remains absolutely clear. I met the director of UNRWA just this morning at the Department for International Development. We will continue to support it and to fund it. To leave refugees in Lebanon and Jordan without support would be a disaster. UNRWA needs to continue to get support, and it will do so from the United Kingdom.

Institute for Free Trade: Launch Cost

8. Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What the cost to the public purse was of the launch of the Institute for Free Trade held on his Department’s premises.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): There was no cost to the public purse.

Chris Bryant: Oh, come off it! Come off it! The right hon. Gentleman must think that we were all born yesterday. The truth is that this was a private party,
which was going on on Government premises, sanctioned by the Foreign Secretary. He has been trying to dress up a tinpot bunch of ideological crackpots as an institute, quite against the law, and he has broken the ministerial code. He has been caught in flagrante delicto, hasn’t he?

**Boris Johnson:** I am under the unhappy duty of contradicting the hon. Gentleman. He is talking the most perfect tripe. The event that took place was completely non-partisan. Members of all parties were present. [Interruption.] Including the Labour party. EU and non-EU ambassadors were represented. It was fully in line with Foreign and Commonwealth Office rules on hosting such events, and I have here a letter from the Cabinet Secretary to confirm that, which I am happy to pass to the hon. Gentleman. I am afraid to say that the Cabinet Secretary has been pestered with complaints from the Labour party about this absolutely blameless event, which was there to support and encourage free trade, which is a major objective of Government policy and should be an objective of the hon. Gentleman—or is it not?

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Was the excellent continental free trade area agreement of the African Union, which would bring great prosperity, discussed? If it was not discussed then, could it be discussed at the next meeting? I would be very happy to pay for it.

**Mr Speaker:** I don’t think it was a meeting, I think it was a booze-up.

**Boris Johnson:** I hesitate for an age before correcting you, Mr Speaker, but it was a serious discussion of the advancement of free trade. The subject of free trade in the African Union, which my hon. Friend raises, is a very good one. The only advice I would give to the African Union is not to acquire a parliament, a court or a single currency.

**Mr Speaker:** I readily defer to the Foreign Secretary’s knowledge of this important event.

**Chris Bryant:** He was there for a long time.

**Mr Speaker:** I do not know how long he was there, and I cannot say that I greatly care. We have had the answers.

**Global Ocean Conservation**

10. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support global ocean conservation.

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas** (Sir Alan Duncan): At the previous Foreign Office questions in January, I explained that the UK is leading by example on ocean conservation. The Government are on track to meet their manifesto blue belt pledge, which will deliver marine protection across nearly 4 million sq km of the waters around our overseas territories by 2020. Through the Commonwealth marine economies programme, we are working to enable small island Commonwealth states to conserve and use their maritime space sustainably.

**Mary Robinson:** In common with my constituents, I welcome the microbeads ban and other measures taken by the Government to protect the marine environment, but we need a global approach. What diplomatic steps is my right hon. Friend taking to engage with the United Nations and other countries to push the blue belt charter up the global agenda?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am grateful to the Minister for that response. Given the importance of the British Council to our soft power, what are the implications of possible cuts to non-overseas development aid funding for the council’s work? How might they affect the Government’s plans for a global Britain?

**Boris Johnson:** I readily defer to the Foreign Secretary’s knowledge of this important event.

**Chris Bryant:** He was there for a long time.

**Mr Speaker:** I do not know how long he was there, and I cannot say that I greatly care. We have had the answers.

**Global Ocean Conservation**

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**British Council**

12. **Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the level of funding for the British Council.

**The Minister for Asia and the Pacific** (Mark Field): I welcome the significant contribution made by the British Council to projecting British values overseas, which I regularly witness on my visits to Asia and the Pacific. My officials and I are in regular dialogue with the British Council across the globe to discuss the scope of its important work. We will continue to work with it to ensure compliance with our manifesto commitment to “place... the British Council on a secure footing”.

**Mr Baron:** I thank the Minister for that response. Given the importance of the British Council to our soft power, what are the implications of possible cuts to non-overseas development aid funding for the council’s work? How might they affect the Government’s plans for a global Britain?

**Mark Field:** The council has agreed to reduce its non-ODA grant from the Foreign Office to zero by the end of the spending review period in exchange for additional official development assistance funding. As part of our vision for a global Britain, we want a properly funded and effective council that projects British values right across the world. The council will continue to deliver activity in non-ODA countries through the income generated from other sources, such as its commercial income.

**Leaving the EU: Diplomatic Co-operation**

14. **Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the strength of the UK’s future diplomatic co-operation with its current EU partners after leaving the EU.

22. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the strength of the UK’s future diplomatic co-operation with its current EU partners after leaving the EU.
The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): We are seeking a deep and special partnership with the EU post Brexit. Our existing relationship provides a strong foundation for vital continued co-operation on global challenges. We are working to strengthen, reinvigorate and reshape our bilateral partnerships with our European partners, focusing on shared values and interests.

Matt Rodda: The Foreign Secretary’s 5,000-word speech on Brexit last week was described by one of his ministerial colleagues as follows:

“He is completely in denial about the complexity of the exit and the negative economic...consequences.”

Will the Foreign Secretary clear something up? Is he in denial or is he just wrong?

Boris Johnson: If I may, I will respectfully resist the alternatives that the hon. Gentleman lays before me. Last week, I was trying to make the point that we now have a massive opportunity to come together—people who voted remain and people who voted leave—to get a positive arrangement and a positive Brexit that will be of massive benefit to people both in this country and in the whole of the European continent. If we are ambitious and positive, I have absolutely no doubt that we can pull it off.

Bambos Charalambous: The Foreign Secretary claimed last week that it would be “intolerable” for the UK not to set its own regulations after Brexit. The next day, a Harvard survey of UK importers and exporters found that the last thing that they want is the dual regulatory burden of having to comply with both UK and EU rules. Will the Foreign Secretary tell us who is right?

Boris Johnson: I think that the Harvard survey is right; nobody wants two sets of regulations to be imposed on the UK economy. That is why the Prime Minister was completely right—wasn’t she?—at Lancaster House and, indeed, in Florence and in sundry other places when she said that Brexit means taking back control of our money, our borders and, above all, our laws. That is what we are going to do.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity to praise the work of Her Majesty’s diplomatic service? Is he content that our embassies in the 27 remaining EU countries are sufficiently resourced to represent the United Kingdom effectively after Brexit?

Boris Johnson: I am so glad that my hon. Friend asked that question because we are not only upgrading seven ambassadorial posts in the 27 other EU countries, but increasing our staffing across the network in the EU by 50.

Chris Bryant: No you’re not.

Boris Johnson: Yes we are. Again, I am getting some negativity from a sedentary position on the Opposition Benches. In addition to beefing up our relations with our EU friends and partners, we will open 15 embassies in Africa.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): It has been pointed out that the Foreign Secretary’s Brexit speech last week was 5,000 words long, but it did not once include the words “Northern” or “Ireland”. That is perhaps the biggest problem that the Government need to tackle, yet the Foreign Secretary did not even mention it. Will he belatedly take the opportunity to explain in simple terms how it is possible for the UK to diverge from the EU in regulations, tariffs and other aspects of trade while retaining the current arrangements on the Irish land border? Will he enlighten us? What is the plan?

Boris Johnson: As the right hon. Lady knows very well, there is no reason whatsoever why we should not be able to exit the customs union and the single market while maintaining frictionless trade not only north-south in Northern Ireland, but with the rest of continental Europe. That is exactly what the Government will spell out in the course of the coming negotiations.

International Peacekeeping

15. Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support international peacekeeping efforts.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The UK champions peacekeeping financially, politically and militarily. Since 2015, we have more than doubled our commitment to UN peacekeeping, with British forces deploying to South Sudan and Somalia. There are now more than 700 UK personnel deployed on eight UN peacekeeping missions in seven countries.

Jess Phillips: In the light of ongoing reports of sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers, does the Minister agree that increasing the number of women peacekeepers is a vital part of addressing the crisis in the long term? Will she also tell us the proportion of peacekeepers from the UK who are women and what plans she has to increase their representation on UN deployments?

Harriett Baldwin: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s leadership on the issue and her work on all aspects of it. I think that she will admire the leadership role that the UK has played not only in putting the subject on the UN’s agenda last year, but with our Prime Minister’s appointment to the Secretary-General’s Circle of Leadership. I assure her that we will continue to champion that agenda at every opportunity.

On the topic that the hon. Lady raised about women from our armed forces, she will know about the impressive agenda that includes the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Act 2018, and that we are aiming to increase the proportion of women from 11% to 15%.

Topical Questions

T3. [903932] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): My immediate priority is to take forward Britain’s response to the humanitarian crisis in Burma and in Bangladesh. I was deeply moved by the plight of Rohingya refugees whom I met in Cox’s
Bazar earlier this month. I went to Burma with the express purpose of raising the tragedy with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. The UK’s goal is to help to create the conditions for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of the refugees to their homes.

The House will join me in welcoming the Gambia back to the Commonwealth, providing an excellent prelude to the Commonwealth summit in London in April.

Henry Smith: Will my right hon. Friend say what discussions he has had with the Government in Wellington about UK-New Zealand trade and co-operation on Brexit?

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I have just returned from a sun-kissed New Zealand, where I had fruitful discussions—[Interruption.]—indoors in the main, with a range of political figures, including my counterparts the Associate Foreign Minister and the Trade Minister, and with the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee. New Zealand is a valued Five Eyes security partner and a priority for a deeper security and trade agreement once we leave the EU. We have the broadest and deepest friendship with New Zealand.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The UK is joint guarantor of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong, yet we have seen booksellers abducted, elected legislators barred and student demonstrators imprisoned, and in Guangdong, in December, 10 people were tried in a sports stadium before being executed. Why did the Prime Minister not raise the issue of human rights in public in Beijing? Was it because she does not care or because she is so desperate to get a trade deal?

Mark Field: I reassure the shadow Minister that the Prime Minister did raise these issues, but we do this not through megaphone diplomacy but in private meetings; we relentlessly raise human rights issues, not least in respect of Hong Kong. As the hon. Lady rightly says, it is vital that Hong Kong’s rights and freedoms are respected. Our most recent six-monthly report states that one country, two systems must continue to function well, and we remain concerned by, for example, the rejection of Agnes Chow’s most recent nomination for March’s Legislative Council election.

T4. [903933] Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What steps has the Department taken to highlight concerns about North Koreans sent to other countries to work, in effect, as slave labourers—and with what result?

Mark Field: We have fully supported the United Nations resolutions that have imposed increasing sanctions upon the use of overseas labour from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Many such workers operate in slavery-like conditions while the DPRK regime takes a large slice of their wages. The latest of those was UN Security Council resolution 2397, which was adopted as recently as 22 December last year.

T6. [903935] Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary mentioned his visit to Bangladesh and Burma, and his meetings with the Rohingya. We hold the pen at the UN on this issue. Will the British Government bring forward a resolution referring Myanmar to the International Criminal Court, given what happened?

Boris Johnson: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman’s interest in this subject. As he knows, the difficulty is that in the UN Security Council there will be those who would not support such a resolution at present. The crucial thing is that everybody in the region and around the world makes it clear to the Government in Naypyidaw and to Daw Suu that the only way forward now for Burma is to create the conditions for a safe, dignified and voluntary return—and that must mean an independent UN-led agency to oversee the repatriation; otherwise those people are going to be too frightened to return. That is the priority on which we should focus.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight this disastrous situation and the importance of the UK’s role. He will be aware that the DRC is an extremely dangerous place even for the UN peacekeepers; some were killed last year. The UK Government are calling on President Kabila to respect the constitution, to fulfil the commitments made in the Saint-Sylvestre accord and to continue with the implementation path to elections this year.

T7. [903937] Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Since the Saudi-led coalition began airstrikes, more than 10,000 civilians have been killed in Yemen. Norway and Germany recently suspended their arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Will what it take for the UK Government to do the same?

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): We have one of the strictest arms control regimes in the world, governed both by this House and by the law, and we will continue to abide by that. In the meantime, we are doing everything we can to encourage a diplomatic solution to end the conflict in Yemen. That is the only thing that will bring the suffering of the people of Yemen to an end.

T9. [903939] Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): In the light of the recent Vote 100 celebrations in this House and the launch of our Equalitea party in Redditch, supported by women and girls of all ages, will my right hon. Friend assure me that his international agendas are also supporting women and girls?

Boris Johnson: We are totally aligned with what is taking place in Redditch in the sense that, as my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa said earlier, our ambition for there to be 12 years of quality education for every girl in the world, which I believe is the universal spanner that will help to unlock so many other global problems, is at the heart of our Commonwealth summit—
Helen Goodman: The universal what?

Boris Johnson: The universal spanner—a device that will solve almost any problem. I truly believe that female education is at the heart of solving so many other global problems, which is why we are putting it at the very centre of the Commonwealth summit in April and the upcoming G7 summit. Across our network, female education is at the heart of everything that we do.

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a lot of chortling going on in the Chamber, but we have had an update on the spanner situation, for which we are indebted to the Foreign Secretary.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What steps is the Department taking to provide training on freedom of religion or belief for its officials?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; I am well aware that this issue is close to his heart. He will be aware that Lord Ahmad and I regularly liaise on the issue with our embassies and high commissions. I wrote a joint letter to those on my patch, in Asia and the Pacific, and I have received replies from Bangladesh, Burma, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. I am encouraged that the network takes the issue as seriously as the hon. Gentleman does.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): If Britain is to assume a more ambitious global trading role as we leave the EU, we shall surely need to expand the depth and reach of our network of high commissions and embassies in regions such as North America. What assurances can my right hon. Friend offer the House that critical diplomatic missions in countries such as Canada are being expanded, not cut back?

Boris Johnson: I am delighted to tell my hon. Friend that to the best of my knowledge we have, just in the past 18 months, opened three new trade missions in North America. I cannot comment about Canada specifically, but we are certainly beefing up our presence in the United States in advance of doing a great free trade deal.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights described what is happening to the Rohingya people as “a military campaign in which ‘you cannot rule out the possibility that acts of genocide have been committed’.”

Having met the victims in Bangladesh and Myanmar, the Foreign Secretary said earlier to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) that a Security Council referral is too difficult. Will he show some leadership and work with our EU partners next week at the Foreign Affairs Council to build support for a referral? The act of a referral will make a difference.

Boris Johnson: As I am sure the hon. Lady knows, Myanmar is not signed up to the International Criminal Court, but there must be no doubt about the gravity of what has taken place. Anybody who flies over northern Rakhine, as I did last week, will see literally hundreds of villages that have been burned or destroyed.

Some 680,000 people have been displaced. This has been ethnic cleansing on an industrial scale and it may also have been genocide. It is vital that the evidence is acquired to determine whether any future prosecution can be mounted.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The recent extension of the state of emergency and the arrest of former President Gayoom and two Supreme Court judges has shown President Yameen tightening his grip in the Maldives and the further extinguishing of the democratic institutions there. Given the fact that at any one time there are literally thousands of British holidaymakers on those islands, and that until recently the Maldives was a welcome member of the Commonwealth family, will the Secretary of State agree to head up a mission there, or encourage the UN to establish one? The situation has the potential to bring China and India into an unwelcome regional conflict.

Mark Field: Like my right hon. Friend I am deeply troubled by the declaration of a state of emergency in the Maldives on 5 February and the accompanying suspension of fundamental rights. Last November in London, I met former President Nasheed, whose own time in office was turbulent, and we discussed the deteriorating situation. We will very much take on board my right hon. Friend’s suggestions.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is the Secretary of State concerned about weekend reports by human rights observers that the civilians of Afrin have been subjected to chemical gas attacks by Turkish forces? Should we expect that conduct from a so-called NATO ally?

Alistair Burt: As I mentioned earlier, any suggestion of the use of chemical weapons must be independently verified. The degree to which they have become more used in the Syrian conflict by a number of different sources, not least the regime, is a matter of great concern, but any suggestion must be properly identified and verified.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): The Good Friday agreement has brought about peace for almost 20 years in Northern Ireland. Will the Foreign Secretary give an unequivocal assurance that Her Majesty’s Government will not do anything that undermines the agreement, including pursuing any policy that undermines the principles that led to its creation?

Boris Johnson: Yes.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State had the chance to speak to the Sri Lankan ambassador regarding his defence attaché Brigadier Priyanka Fernando and his behaviour on 4 February, when he made throat-slitting gestures to Tamil protesters? If somebody else incited hatred in that way on our streets, they would be interviewed by the police. Will the Minister make arrangements for Brigadier Priyanka Fernando to be interviewed by the police about that crime?

Mark Field: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the UK takes this incident very seriously. When I spoke recently to Foreign Minister Marapana, he left me in no doubt that the Sri Lankan Government were treating it with the seriousness that it deserves. They have informed
the UK Government that they have ordered the defence attaché to return to Colombo from London with immediate effect for consultations while the incident is thoroughly investigated. I hope that the UK and Sri Lanka bilateral relationship will remain strong and co-operative.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I know the Foreign Secretary shares my view that our leadership in marine conservation, particularly in respect of the blue belt, is a source of national pride, but may I urge him please to use the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in April to press our Commonwealth allies, more than half of which are island states, to make that a high priority in the discussions ahead?

Boris Johnson: I commend the hon. Gentleman for the manner in which he is defending the interests of his constituent. I am acutely aware of this case. Adrian was murdered in Trinidad. We cannot interfere in the judicial process, but we are extending every possible support. I advise the House that we understand that a preliminary trial to determine whether there is sufficient evidence to charge the accused with murder will be held on 8 March. I hope that this will mark some progress towards what the hon. Gentleman is seeking.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): Millions of people are celebrating the seventh anniversary of the start of the Libyan uprising and the ousting of Colonel Gaddafi. Fayez al-Sarraj has been the Prime Minister of Libya for nearly two years and progress has been painfully slow. Will the Secretary of State update the House on what his Department is doing to help the Government of National Accord to bring about a prosperous and—more importantly—peaceful Libya?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his interest in a country that is still bedevilled by factional feuding between a very small number of men—a maximum of about half a dozen—who have it in their power to come together and build a better future for Libya. We are trying to back the efforts of UN Special Representative Ghassan Salamé to bring the eastern and western parts of Libya together, with a plan for the whole country—a new constitution, to be followed by elections. That is what we are working for.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): May I ask the Minister for the Middle East what representations have been made in the case of Nabeel Rajab, the president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, who is facing another long prison sentence tomorrow, simply for taking to social media to criticise torture in Bahrain’s prisons and the Saudi-led war in Yemen?

Alistair Burt: There are a small number of those who have been arrested and have had lengthy trials in Bahrain. The United Kingdom has made representations in a number of these cases, including those mentioned by the hon. Gentleman, and we continue to monitor the trials and processes very carefully.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Estimates suggest that 12 million tonnes of plastic go into our oceans every year, causing immense damage to our ecosystems. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need not only to get involved on the global stage to influence the cleaning up of our oceans, but to lead by example in the UK, not least—it might only be a small thing—by giving up plastic for Lent as far as we can, as many hon. Members are doing?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend speaks for millions of people in the country who feel ashamed to see the state of our oceans and wish that they could be cleared up. This country is taking a lead. Cracking down on plastic waste will certainly be at the heart of the Commonwealth summit. I have to admit that I do not know how easily I could give up plastic for Lent. I have a plastic biro in my right hand; I propose to take it out and dispose of it in a suitable manner. My hon. Friend is entirely right.
Medical Cannabis

3.37 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement on the case of Alfie Dingley, whose parents and doctors are seeking access to medical cannabis to treat his epilepsy.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I, personally, and the Government sympathise deeply with the situation faced by Alfie Dingley and his family. I think that everyone on both sides of the House and outside it will understand and respect the desire of the family to try to alleviate his suffering in any way possible. I assure my hon. Friend that we want to help to find a solution within the existing regulations.

As my hon. Friend will know, the current situation is that cannabis, in its raw form, is not recognised in the UK as having any medicinal benefits. It is therefore listed as a schedule 1 drug under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001. This means that it is unlawful to produce, supply or possess raw cannabis unless it is for the purposes of research. Products must be thoroughly tested in the UK to provide the necessary assurances of their efficacy, quality and safety.

We have a clear regime in place that is administered by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency to enable medicines, including those containing controlled drugs such as cannabis, to be developed, licensed and made available for medicinal use to patients in the UK, as happened in the case of Sativex, as my hon. Friend knows. The Home Office will consider issuing a licence to enable trials of any new medicine under schedule 1 to the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001, providing that it complies with appropriate ethical approvals. Cannabis-based products should be treated in the same way as all other drugs, meaning that they should go through the normal testing procedures applied to any other medicines.

The current situation is that outside of research we would not issue licences for the personal consumption of cannabis because it is listed as a schedule 1 drug. However, we are aware of differing approaches in other countries and continue to monitor the World Health Organisation’s expert committee on drug dependence, which has committed to reviewing the use of medicinal cannabis. We will wait until the outcome of the review before considering any next steps. [Interruption.] I am also aware—before the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) starts chuntering—that the private Member’s Bill on the legalisation of cannabis for medicinal purposes introduced by the hon. Gentleman will give the House a further opportunity to debate the wider policy.

The whole House will understand that it is a natural desire for parents to do everything they can to make sure that their children do not suffer unnecessarily, but we also need to make sure that cannabis is subjected to the same regulatory framework that applies to all medicines in the UK. We must ensure that only medicines that have been tested for their safety to the correct standard are prescribed for UK children.

Crispin Blunt: I thank my right hon. Friend the Attorney General, Alfie Dingley’s MP, who has been working hard, if necessarily privately, on his behalf.

I hope that the Home Office is going to find a way to cease standing behind a 1961 UN scheduling of cannabis as having no medicinal benefit whatsoever. My right hon. Friend mentioned Sativex. However, there are now 12, soon to be 15, states of the European Union and 29 states of the United States of America, and the District of Columbia, that have all found a way to license the medicinal use of cannabis. Is he aware of the position of the Republic of Ireland, which, with a legal framework very similar to ours, gave its Health Minister the explicit power to license use of the medicine in cases such as Alfie’s?

My right hon. Friend’s position, and that of the Government, currently flies in the face of the popular view in the United Kingdom, where 78% of people think that we should find a way of using cannabis-based medicine. Out there, most people instinctively understand the pain and symptom relief that is available from cannabis-based medicines. Here, we know from the Barnes review of 2016, commissioned by the all-party parliamentary group on drug policy reform, that there is good, peer-reviewed medical evidence of the effectiveness of cannabis-based medicines for conditions associated with multiple sclerosis, the side-effects of chemotherapy, and epilepsy.

Failure by the Government to move from their current position will sentence Alfie to the steroid-based treatment he was receiving before he went to the Netherlands, which is likely to give him early psychosis and a premature death. Their position also means that British citizens are being denied all the potential medical and symptomatic benefits that could come from a properly licensed, regulated and researched access programme to cannabis-based medicines. If we do not give people the licences to do the medical research, we will not get the products. Granting the licences would mean that we would not have to rely on the wisdom of crowds and illegally sourced and unreliable products, and would have peer-reviewed, evidence-based treatments produced to pharmaceutical standards.

I urge my right hon. Friend, who is very far from being cruel and heartless—as indeed are the rest of his colleagues in the Home Office—to help either the manufacturers of the drug that will save Alfie’s life, or his doctors or the family to find a way through to get a licence to treat him, and to instruct his officials to assist. It is an indication of just how messed up our management of this issue is that my right hon. Friend from the Home Office is answering this urgent question and not a Health Minister. On health grounds, this is an open-and-shut case.

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend. I totally respect his position. I should place it on record that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), is sitting next to me, very much in listening mode.

I reassure my hon. Friend, and my right hon. Friend the Attorney General, who has made many representations to me on behalf of Alfie Dingley and his family, that there are clearly some special circumstances in this case that need to be respected. I have undertaken to meet the family, and I will do that as quickly as possible. I also
undertake to explore every option within the current regulatory framework. I give that undertaking with sincerity.

I know my hon. Friend well enough to know that he will understand the importance of proceeding on the basis of evidence, particularly when it concerns the safety of drugs and of children. We have our position—he is right that it has been established for a long time—and it is supported by expert opinion. However, we are aware that the position is shifting in other countries, and we monitor that closely.

We are also aware that cannabis is an extremely complex substance, and the WHO quite rightly is looking at it from every angle to get an up-to-date view on its therapeutic use. We are monitoring all that closely. Our current regulatory position is what it is. However, I have undertaken to explore every option within the regulatory framework to see whether we can find a solution to this extremely emotive case.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): There has been a call to allow a licence for administering medical cannabis to Alfie Dingley, but the Government must thoroughly examine the evidence in this area—both the stated benefits and the supposed risks of medical cannabis. Our policies must always be based on evidence and not frightened of scary headlines or chasing favourable ones. Only in that way can the House come to an informed decision on the wider issues.

Alfie Dingley is a six-year-old boy whose life is blighted by epileptic fits, and it is understandable that his family want him to have whatever medication they feel will help him. They look to us as politicians to facilitate that, but we are constrained by laws. Members supportive of drug policy reform would like the Home Secretary to issue a licence so that Alfie can continue taking the medication, but the Home Office has responded that the drug “cannot be practically prescribed, administered or supplied to the public”.

Cannabis use is illegal in this country—we do not dispute that. However, we need assurances from the Minister that all the evidence relating to Alfie’s case has been looked at and that all avenues of treatment are being considered. We need confidence that the Minister and his colleagues are doing everything in their power to ensure that Alfie has the best possible quality of life.

This case is the latest in a long line of prominent examples that have led to more calls for legislation to permit the medical use of cannabis. Is it now time for a review of the law, to look at how we can better support those living in chronic pain, those with long-term degenerative conditions and those in the final stages of life?

Mr Hurd: I agree with the hon. Lady that policy should be evidence-led, and I support entirely her point that we need to think very carefully about the implications and consequences of everything we do.

As I said in my statement, outside of research we would not issue licences for the personal consumption of cannabis because it is listed as a schedule 1 drug. However, as in the case of Sativex, the Home Office will consider issuing a licence to enable trials of any new medicine under schedule 1 to the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001, providing it complies with appropriate ethical approvals. I repeat that I personally undertake to explore every option within the existing regulations to see if we can find a solution.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I support the medical use of cannabis and think the Government should be more fleet of foot on this issue. A sensible proposed amendment to the law in a free vote in this House would, I think, be carried.

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment. I dispute the allegation that the Government are not fleet of foot on this. As I said in my statement, we are aware that things are changing in other countries and that the WHO is reviewing the evidence, and we will follow that very closely indeed.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): We would have to have a heart of stone if any of our children or grandchildren were in this position and we were told by a stubborn bureaucracy that they had to turn blue up to 30 times a day and have seizures because our law says that that is the situation. Twenty-nine American states have legalised cannabis for medicinal purposes, and in every one of them the use of deadly, dangerous opioids has gone down. Every alternative to natural cannabis is worse. It is not just one case; thousands of people have the choice of suffering terrible pain and seizures every day or criminalising themselves by breaking the law. I urge them to break the law, because the law in this case is an ass, and it is cruel and lacks compassion.

Mr Hurd: I do not have a heart of stone, and I say that not just as a parent of six children. Anyone with or without children could not fail to be moved by this case, but, as the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said, we have to look at this through the lens of its implications across the system. We have to look at this through the lens of the existing law, which is set on the basis of expert advice, not least from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. It is very clear that “the use of cannabis is a significant public health issue”, and, in its words, can “unquestionably cause harm to individuals and society.”

We cannot ignore that advice. However, as I have said, we are monitoring closely the work done by the WHO and other countries, and precedents elsewhere, and, as I have undertaken to do in this particular case, we will explore every option within the existing regulations.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): As the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) said, it is not just Alfie; thousands of people have such conditions. I have a constituent, Vicky Clarke—now just 5 stone in weight—in St Giles hospice in my constituency, suffering from the very final stages of multiple sclerosis. Her husband has found that the only drug that alleviated her pain was cannabis, and he has twice been investigated by the police. We are not talking about the general administration of cannabis; we are talking about the medical prescription of cannabis. If a doctor says that cannabis is the only cure or a medical professional says that it is the only way to alleviate pain, surely they should be legally allowed to prescribe that drug.
Mr Hurd: Well, they still have to operate within the law. The law does permit the development, licensing and marketing of medicines, including those containing controlled drugs, such as cannabis. I have used the example of Sativex, which I believe provides relief to patients with MS. My hon. Friend talks about lots of other cases like this one. It is worth noting, however, that in the case of Alfie Dingley, I think only nine other children in the world suffer from the same type of epilepsy as he does. That is why I have undertaken to explore every option on his behalf. I make it quite clear that the Home Office and the Government are keeping this area under review, because this is fast moving. The House will of course have the chance to debate it along with the private Member’s Bill.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish National party is in favour of the decriminalisation of cannabis for medicinal use, given the evidence of the benefit it has in alleviating the symptoms of many serious conditions, such as that suffered by young Alfie Dingley. In 2016, our party conference heard evidence from a multiple sclerosis sufferer, Laura Brennan-Whitefield, who called for “compassion and common sense” on this issue. She said:

“I’m not advocating the smoking of cannabis, what I’m advocating is a progressive and reasonable, compassionate society where you can access pain relief”.

We urge the UK Government to look again very seriously at decriminalising the use of cannabis for medicinal use. If they are not prepared to do so, we ask them to devolve the power to Scotland, so that the Scottish Government can take appropriate steps. However, we would like to see this for everybody in the United Kingdom.

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her contribution, and this issue will be debated with the private Member’s Bill on Friday. Again, I come back to the point that we have the existing regulatory framework, and we will not issue licences for the personal consumption of cannabis because it is listed as a schedule 1 drug. However, it is possible to consider issuing licences to enable trials of any new medicine under schedule 1 to the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001, and there is precedent for doing so.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I call the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), can I ask him whether he was present at the start of these exchanges?

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con) indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: He was. Very good.

Bob Stewart: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I certainly was here, just silent. I support the medical use of cannabis, particularly in this case. If the Bill sponsored by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) passes with a sufficient majority on Friday, might the Government fast-track it through the House?

Mr Hurd: We look forward to the debate on Friday. We will see what the will of the House is.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister has heard support from those of us on these Benches, but does he not support the views of his colleagues in the Scottish Parliament, where the health spokesman Miles Briggs said:

“it is time for a comprehensive, UK wide review...and for Parliament to look to reform access to cannabis for medical and scientific purposes”?

Does he recognise that there is widespread support in all parties?

Mr Hurd: There are good reasons for the Government’s current position. As I made clear in my statement, we are looking very closely at the approaches being taken by other countries. We have a keen eye on what the global experts, the WHO’s expert committee on drug dependence, conclude in relation to the therapeutic and medicinal benefits of cannabis.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is Bill number three on Friday. There is not going to be a debate, is there?

Mr Hurd: That depends on what happens to the first two Bills.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I have had a number of constituents in the past eight years who have suffered from different illnesses, such as epilepsy and multiple sclerosis. They told me that conventional drugs have not worked for them. Often, they have had to travel abroad, especially Holland, to obtain and use cannabis, which has helped them significantly. I therefore urge the Minister and the Government to please consider allowing the medicinal use of cannabis.

Mr Hurd: I totally understand the hon. Lady’s point, which underlines why the WHO is undertaking its work. I am sure she will agree, however, that cannabis products must be treated in the same way as all other drugs. That means going through the normal testing procedures that apply to any other medicine.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I help the Minister and suggest that he speak with his colleague the Secretary of State for Health and ask about the extensive trial, known as delta-9, which took place in the Royal Marsden hospital 40 years ago? Cannabis was found to be an excellent prophylactic against nausea caused by ontological medicine. The data is there. The empirical evidence is there. Why does he not save time and trouble by having a word with the Secretary of State and drawing this information to the attention of the House? Let us resolve this matter once and for all.

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman will understand why I approach any offer of help from him with caution, but in this case I will certainly discuss the evidence he mentions with my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care. We need to proceed on the basis of evidence, because of the need for safety.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Government have heard several times that cannabis for medicinal use is available in many countries. It is clear that the evidence is there. It is allowed in other EU countries. One of the benefits of being in the EU, while
we are still there, is collaboration. We are able to review research that is available elsewhere and come to a quick decision. Will the Minister confirm that there are no barriers at the top level of the Government preventing that?

Mr Hurd: I am not aware of any barriers. What I am aware of is the current regulatory framework, underpinned by expert advice, which continues to be that cannabis in its raw form is not recognised in the UK as having any medicinal benefit. The situation is evolving in other countries and the WHO is looking at it. It is right that we keep an open mind and that we continue to look at the evidence and the precedence from other countries.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group on epilepsy and as the daughter of an epilepsy sufferer. In addition to the cost in human misery, can the Minister advise on whether any attempt has been made to estimate the net cost of continuous ineffective treatment for epilepsy sufferers who are denied access to cannabis for medicinal purposes?

Mr Hurd: I think that question is best answered by the Department of Health. What I am keen to register with the House is our determination to try to explore every option within the boundaries of the existing regulations to see whether we can support this case.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The whole House will welcome the fact that the Minister has agreed to meet the family of Alfie Dingley. Will he also agree to meet the campaign group End Our Pain, which is campaigning to allow doctors to prescribe cannabis when it would help their patients? End Our Pain wants to present to the Minister the evidence that honourable colleagues have talked about and discuss the fact that the Multiple Sclerosis Society has changed its position on the use of medicinal cannabis, based on the evidence.

Mr Hurd: I am certainly happy to meet that group, or a more appropriate Minister could, so the answer is yes.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I wonder whether the Minister knows the book “The Boy in 7 Billion”, by Callie Blackwell, the mum of Deryn Blackwell who, at the age of 10, was diagnosed with a very rare cancer and then, through the use of cannabis oil, made a miraculous recovery. If he likes, I can lend him my copy. I got one over recess at THTC, a company of which I am a member, and it made a miraculous recovery. If he likes, I can lend him my copy. I got one over recess at THTC, a company of which I am a member, and it made a miraculous recovery.

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady is taking us beyond a UK scope. I do not know the book and I am grateful to her for her offer, but I come back to what I said at the start. The Government have a position based on the listing as a schedule 1 drug and the view of experts, but we review, and keep under review, what is happening in other countries and, most importantly, the WHO’s position.
and stop making excuses. Can the Minister tell the parents of children such as Alfie and all the other people who need access to medicinal cannabis legally across the UK when that is going to happen?

Mr Hurd: What the Government do is listen to the independent, statutory Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, which has been very clear that “the use of cannabis is a significant public health issue. Cannabis can unquestionably cause harm to individuals and society.” We cannot just ignore that expert advice. As I said in my statement, there is a precedent for medicines, including controlled drugs such as cannabis and Sativex, to be issued with a licence to enable trials.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I intend no discourtesy to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), but he was certainly not in that place some minutes ago. Whether he has just entered the Chamber, or has beetled there from another part of the Chamber—

Mr Seely indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: He has beetled around the Chamber. It is slightly confusing for the Chair when people perambulate around the Chamber. Nevertheless, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has important thoughts to volunteer, so let us hear them.

Mr Seely: Looking around the world, it seems to me that the case for medical cannabis is somewhat overwhelming, although I understand that the Minister is in a difficult position at the moment. Does he think that there will ever be a time when medical cannabis is legal in this country, so that its benefits can be felt by those who need it?

Mr Hurd: Of course, policy must be evidence-led, so Governments of all colours must keep the evidence under review. I think that the next critical milestone will be the output of the WHO review. Cannabis is a highly complex substance, and the review is looking at it from every angle to try to give us the most definitive, up-to-date view on its medicinal and therapeutic benefits.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says that public health concerns are a key driver of policy making, but, as we have seen with the case just for piloting safe drug consumption rooms, the Government stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the overwhelming body of evidence that shows that public health would benefit. Is this not just another example of the Government putting the inertia of the criminal justice system ahead of an urgent public health issue, with drug-related deaths at epidemic levels? Will the Government not change the emphasis in policy making to matters of public health, rather than the inertia of the criminal justice system, which for 40 years has had an obsolete and arbitrary method of regulating drugs in this country?

Mr Hurd: I do not recognise that description of “inertia”. I have tried to give a flavour of the fact that this is a highly complex area that we keep under constant review.
are fairly and equitably represented. It is also in the best interests of maintaining and strengthening the Union, to which the Government remain fully committed, consistent with the principle of consent. We will therefore continue to explore with the parties whether the basis for a political agreement still exists. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has reaffirmed, we stand ready to introduce the legislation that would enable an Executive to be formed at the earliest opportunity. That is the Government’s clear hope and desire, and I believe that our view is shared widely on both sides of the House.

Secondly, however, matters in Northern Ireland cannot simply remain in a state of limbo. A number of challenging decisions will have to be made. Ultimately, the Government have a responsibility to ensure good governance and the continued delivery of public services. In particular, as the head of the Northern Ireland civil service has made clear, there needs to be certainty and clarity on a budget for Northern Ireland for next year as soon as possible. I intend to take steps to provide that clarity, and I will update the House as soon as I am in a position to do so. This is clearly not where I want to be, but in the absence of an Executive in Northern Ireland I have no other choice.

In the longer term, the Government will not shirk their responsibility to take whatever steps are necessary to provide certainty and stability for the people of Northern Ireland, while maintaining our commitment to govern with rigorous impartiality in the interests of all of them. However, we will do that only once we are sure that all other viable options designed to restore devolved government have been properly considered, including my current statutory obligation to call an Assembly election.

In the absence of devolution, it is also right for us to consider the issue of salaries for Assembly Members. At the end of last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup received recommendations on that from Mr Trevor Reaney, a former Clerk of the Assembly. The Government will need to decide shortly on the next steps. I acknowledge the public concern about the fact that while a number of Assembly Members continue to carry out constituency and representative functions, current salaries are maintained while the Assembly is not meeting.

As for the issue of addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past, the Government have manifesto commitments to consult on the implementation of the bodies set out in the 2014 Stormont House agreement, and to support the reform of inquests. I would much prefer to do that in the context of an agreement that would lead to the restoration of a devolved Executive, but I am conscious of the Government’s responsibility to make progress in this respect to provide better outcomes for victims and survivors—the people who suffered most during the troubles. We will therefore continue to proceed towards a full consultation as soon as possible, so that everyone can have their say.

As the House will know, April marks the 20th anniversary of the historic Belfast agreement. That agreement, along with its successors, has been fundamental in helping Northern Ireland to move forward from its violent past to a brighter, more secure future. The Government’s support for those agreements remains steadfast, as does our commitment to govern for everyone in Northern Ireland.

There is no doubt that Northern Ireland has taken huge strides forward in the past 20 years. In my short time as Northern Ireland Secretary, I have seen a place full of wonderful talent and huge potential, but any commemorations this year will look decidedly hollow if Northern Ireland still has no functioning Government of its own. Everyone must continue to strive to see devolved government restored and to build a Northern Ireland fit for the future, and that remains the clear focus and determination of this Government.
So I welcome the Secretary of State’s confirmation that the Government’s support for the agreement remains steadfast, and I ask her to confirm that she sees the Good Friday agreement as the only viable long-term option for the peaceful governance of Northern Ireland, and that the Government believe that its unique form of power sharing is indispensable to the agreement.

Coming back to last week and the events in Belfast, a simple way for the Government to clear up this confusion is to publish precisely where there was agreement and where the gaps remain—not in order to apportion blame, but to provide greater reassurance that progress has been made over the 13 months. So will the Secretary of State commit to providing further detail and to publishing some of those details?

One area where the Secretary of State has offered some further clarity today is on the possibility of a fresh election in Northern Ireland, and she should know that that would be met with glacial enthusiasm. Why does the Secretary of State think there is potentially an advantage in another election, the fifth in three years, in Northern Ireland? What would it achieve? Although she does have a statutory duty to call one at some point, that has been true since 27 March last year, and she and her predecessor have resisted the temptation to date.

The Secretary of State has also said that she is considering how best to give some certainty about the budget in Northern Ireland. We understand and accept that, and urge only that she consults properly with the parties, so that we can ensure maximum acceptance of, and agreements on, those budget allocations as part of the contingency planning. I hope she can commit to that too today.

Finally, may I ask the Secretary of State to consider what she will do to take forward some of the pressing issues facing Northern Ireland if her optimism is misplaced and a deal cannot be struck? It is not just on the issue of MLAs’ pay that people in Northern Ireland want to see action. Vital questions on the treatment of victims, both of the troubles and of historical institutional abuse, need to be resolved not just with consultation, but with legislation. These people have been waiting for far too long, so will she commit to looking at that in the absence of a deal?

Will the Secretary of State also commit to taking forward issues of human rights and social justice that are enjoyed naturally in other parts of the UK but denied to our citizens in Northern Ireland? In particular, can she confirm that one area of discussion between the parties was on the issue of equal marriage, and that agreement was reached to take matters forward through a private Member’s Bill in Stormont? In the absence of a Stormont Bill, would she consider legislating similarly to extend equal marriage rights to Northern Ireland? We believe that she should, and we will support her if she does so. To be clear, a Labour Government would legislate on that if Stormont could not do so.

Political problems are nothing new in Northern Ireland, but the current impasse has left the Northern Irish people without an accountable Government for almost 400 days. This is a profound crisis, and the Government have a profound duty to try to resolve it, and to preserve the Good Friday agreement and the principle of power sharing. We will continue to support the Government in trying to resolve the crisis, and we will support them on legislation wherever it is necessary, but we will hold them to account to preserve the Good Friday agreement in its spirit and its letter.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and for the tone of them. It is important that we in this House show unity and a unified front when it comes to resolving these issues and re-establishing devolved government in Northern Ireland. If both sides of the House work together with that purpose in mind, we will have all the more reason to hope that that can be achieved. He asked about a number of matters, and I will try to address as many of them as I can.

On the topic of legacy, to which I made reference in my statement, we have been working with the parties and the Victims’ Commissioner on a consultation programme. As I have said, I would very much prefer to do that in the context of devolved government in Stormont, but we clearly have a responsibility to the victims of the troubles, and it is absolutely right that we should deal with that. We will take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that the matter of legacy is dealt with, but as I say, we would much rather that it was done in the context of having devolved government in Stormont. We are committed to the institutions as set out in the Stormont House agreement, and we will be consulting on that.

We are also committed to the Belfast agreement, as I said in my statement, and to all successor agreements. The position in the Conservative party manifesto at the last election, and the position of this Government, is that the Belfast agreement is the right approach. It has led to great success for Northern Ireland, and more success can come. The hon. Gentleman mentioned Brexit. The joint report that was signed before Christmas makes specific reference to a commitment to the Belfast agreement and to respecting the institutions in the agreement.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the talks, and about what the British Government would publish. I want to make it clear that the talks that we have facilitated—we did not impose them—have been between the parties, particularly the two main parties. Therefore, any documentation or anything that has been written down is a matter for the parties; it is not a matter for the British Government. He also asked about an election. I have a statutory duty as Secretary of State to call an election, but I want to ensure that we have exhausted every avenue and every viable option to re-establish devolved government at Stormont. That is what the Government want to see, and that is what we are working towards. We will do all we can to achieve that, and I thank him for his support in that regard.

James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): It is good to be back, and I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for their kind, generous and supportive comments over the past few weeks. What is not so welcome, however, is the continuing lack of devolved government in Northern Ireland, which it desperately needs. I commend the Secretary of State for all her work and for her efforts in seeking to bring the parties together. I also commend the Irish Government for their work.

I commend what the Secretary of State said about the Government’s commitment the Belfast agreement. That is our cornerstone; it is the bedrock of what we do.
I also commend what she said about the troubles and the legacy of the past, and about making progress on the consultation. I hope that she will agree, however, that we need to remain firmly focused on restoring devolved government. Rather than talking up direct rule, we should continue to focus on talking out the remaining issues that lie between the two parties, and I hope that she will agree that we need to retain that focus in all we do if we are to restore devolved government and give Northern Ireland the bright, positive future that I know its people want to see.

Karen Bradley: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments and questions, and for his approach. He was an outstanding Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and he is very much missed in Northern Ireland. I do not think I have been to a single event since being appointed Secretary of State where he has not been mentioned in the warmest and most generous terms. I am fully aware that his are big shoes for me to fill.

I agree with all that my right hon. Friend says about the importance of restoring devolved government for the people of Northern Ireland. The people of Northern Ireland elected the Members of the Legislative Assembly, and those MLAs need to be in Stormont. That fabulous, wonderful Parliament building is empty and bereft, and it needs to be filled with the people who were elected to fill it, taking decisions on behalf of their constituents for all the people in Northern Ireland.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I join others in welcoming the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), on his return to the Chamber.

I also thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement, but we share the disappointment we are hearing that, although there has been some progress to report, there has not been enough. We welcome the continued public commitment of the UK and Irish Governments to the Good Friday agreement, noting, as she does, that we are approaching its 20th anniversary.

The Good Friday agreement and the institutions it established were endorsed by the people of Northern Ireland, and the preservation and restoration of those institutions should be the focus of all the parties and interlocutors involved in these vital talks. We also note the Irish Government’s firm position that the agreement, and its subsequent agreements, must be implemented in full, and in that context the Irish Government have reiterated that they do not want to see the introduction of direct rule in Northern Ireland.

I ask the Secretary of State to clarify her timetable for the next steps she has outlined. In particular, given the absence of talks, under what circumstances would she consider calling fresh elections to the Assembly? What consideration has she given to convening the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which was established under strand 3 of the Good Friday agreement?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and for his statement of commitment to the Belfast agreement. On my priorities now, in the past few weeks I have focused on the talks process. I still continue to work and communicate with all parties to see what we can do to re-establish discussion and to help the parties get to an accommodation that will enable a devolved Executive to be established. My priority in the immediate term is clearly the budget, as we need to make sure that the dedicated civil servants and public servants in Northern Ireland have the certainty they need to continue delivering public services.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Of course this is an extremely important statement, upon which a further 27 hon. and right hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, but I remind the House that there are two further ministerial statements to follow that might be considered to be on chunky matters eliciting substantial interest, and several people have applied to speak in the debate subsequent to that. There is therefore a premium on brevity, and I appeal to colleagues not to offer us mini speeches, which is not uncommon in these circumstances, but rather pithy inquiries to which I know the Secretary of State will succinctly reply. We can be led in this exercise by someone of no lesser distinction than the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Theresa Villiers.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): None of us should underestimate the difficulty of reaching accommodation on issues of culture and identity that have divided people for centuries. Will the Secretary of State urge the parties to come together to try to find a balanced package that reflects the cultural sensitivities of all sides of the community in modern Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and hers are another pair of shoes that I endeavour to fill. She was an excellent Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. She went through a number of these processes, so she knows only too well how these things operate. I agree wholeheartedly with what she says.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I join others in warmly welcoming the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) back to the Chamber. I wish him well.

As the Secretary of State knows, we of course stand ready to form an Executive tomorrow, on the basis of no preconditions and on the basis of the programme for Government that was agreed with Sinn Féin back in December, before Sinn Féin walked out and set preconditions—political demands—that they want to see implemented before they get back into the Executive.

The fact that there is no Executive is not the fault of the Democratic Unionist party. Indeed, it is not the fault of the smaller parties, either—I make that very clear. But in the absence of devolved government, now is the time for the Secretary of State to do right by all the people of Northern Ireland.

I have just come from a meeting of a group of charities and others who want somebody to lobby—a Minister to argue with—about mental health funding in Northern Ireland. There have been no Ministers for 13 months. That cannot continue. Secretary of State, it is time to set a budget. Let the efforts for devolution continue—yes, we want to see devolution—but it is a dereliction of duty to continue without a budget and without ministerial decisions. It is time to get on with it.
Karen Bradley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his assertion of the DUP’s commitment to devolved government, which is warmly welcomed by everyone. He and I have had and will continue to have discussions about the budget. The shadow Secretary of State asked whether I would be consulting the parties about the budget. I have committed to do that and will ensure that I work with the right hon. Gentleman and his party’s Members on that. He fervently summed up the reasons why devolved government is so important.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend. Friend on her statement and warmly welcome seeing my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) back in his place and in fine form.

The head of the Northern Ireland civil service said to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 24 January: “It will be incredibly difficult for us if we do not have budget certainty by 8 February.”

It is now 20 February. What will the Secretary of State now do to set a budget and therefore the political direction that Northern Ireland so needs?

Karen Bradley: I thank the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. As I said in my statement, I am now working to ensure that we get certainty for civil servants in Northern Ireland—those dedicated public servants—and I will return to the House when I have further information.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): The Secretary of State was absolutely right to say that she was not willing to conduct a running commentary on the talks, but now that they have collapsed once again, should she not publish the basis on which the talks failed yet again? The people of Northern Ireland have a right to know the areas of difference and what still needs to be resolved.

Karen Bradley: As I explained in my response to the shadow Secretary of State, I was not present at the discussions held between the two parties. I facilitated them, but I was not present during them. It would therefore be inappropriate for me to speculate on exactly where the parties reached in discussing their concerns. It is a matter of public record, however, that I have said that the concerns related to the very difficult issues of language and culture and the sustainability of the Executive.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Would there be any role for the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly if direct rule, which nobody in this House wants, were to be instituted?

Karen Bradley: Some Opposition Members were Ministers during the previous period of direct rule—the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) will be asking a question shortly—and it was clear then that there was no role for Members of the Assembly at that point.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): It is clear from the talks and their failure that the structures of the Belfast agreement have given a power of veto and blackmail to Sinn Féin. Given that there will be no giving in to that blackmail, will the Secretary of State recognise that, in the absence of the ability to set up an Executive, the only way forward for proper governance in Northern Ireland is for her to start taking some of the decisions that are important for the day-to-day running of Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: As I said in my statement, I want to see devolved government in Northern Ireland. I want the politicians elected by people in Northern Ireland to be able to take their places and represent them in the Assembly, and I want an Executive in place. That is what I am focused on trying to deliver as best we can, as I think Members on both sides of the House have stated.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State set out what role, if any, the smaller parties played in the talks last week?

Karen Bradley: All five parties were involved in the talks, including some roundtable talks. However, the clear point is that, for an Executive to be formed, the two large parties need to reach an accommodation. That is what we were working towards, and what I would like to happen in the near future.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): In the welcome absence of direct rule, of which I had personal experience as a Minister, will the Secretary of State tell the House how she will bring forward the budget, what form the approval of that budget will take and whether, as the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) asked, Assembly Members will make any contribution to the discussions of the proposals in it?

Karen Bradley: I know that the right hon. Gentleman served as a Minister during the last period of direct rule. I have been led to believe that there was a small incident involving a football match—Wales versus Northern Ireland—when he possibly found it difficult to know which side to support. I have said that I will come back to the House on the budget.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. I know that for her, as for me, the priority will be to ensure that the peace process keeps on track. Will she therefore outline in some detail what exactly direct rule would mean for the people of Northern Ireland and for this House?

Karen Bradley: My focus is on getting devolved government back up and running because people want to know that their elected politicians—the people they have elected locally—will make the decisions for them. Those of us who believe in devolution, be it locally in our constituencies or in the devolved Administrations, know that, when local people make decisions, they are more representative of what voters want. That is why it is so important to get devolved government back up and running.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s continuing commitment to the Good Friday agreement, but does she agree that being more open and transparent about what happened in the talks—notwithstanding the fact that she says that she cannot do that because they were conducted by the Democratic
Unionist party and Sinn Féin—and explaining to the public the problems and where the parties failed to agree might mean that they were in a position to support more properly the leaders of their respective communities who are trying to reach a deal?

Karen Bradley: As I have said, it would not be appropriate for me to speculate on what happened behind closed doors at a meeting between the two parties. They are now working to see what they can do to come back to the table, and that is what I am encouraging.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): I join in the tributes to my right hon. Friend. I have said that I will come to the House about the budget. Last Friday, I met business representatives in Belfast and they were unanimous that they needed their politicians to form an Executive so that they could encourage investment, create jobs and wealth and build on the fantastic success story that is Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: I agree with my hon. Friend. We need to make sure Northern Ireland’s voice is heard set one—when will she do it?

Edward Argar: Does the Secretary of State share my anxieties about the restoration of a devolved power-sharing Executive, to make it the best Brexit deal not just for Northern Ireland but for the whole of the UK. Does she agree that the important matters that divide us are not life and death matters that require a budget to resolve them? She has the power to press on, not least because, with Brexit on the horizon, the Secretary of State’s continuing optimism and urge her to help anybody, but the people of Northern Ireland want their Assembly up and running—it is their Assembly—and they were extremely disappointed and angry last week when the talks collapsed. I am not pointing the finger of blame, because that is not going to help anybody, but the people of Northern Ireland will also be extremely angry that MLAs are receiving their full salary. What possible justification can there be for paying them a full salary 13 months after collapsing the Assembly?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. My predecessor did ask Trevor Reaney to look at this matter. I will be considering the recommendations and will come back to the House shortly.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly commend the Secretary of State for her calm and positive tone in her statement today and her response to questions. I am very pleased that the British Government have not been bounced into moving to direct rule. The people of Northern Ireland want their Assembly up and running—it is their Assembly—and they were extremely disappointed and angry last week when the talks collapsed. I am not pointing the finger of blame, because that is not going to help anybody, but the people of Northern Ireland will also be extremely angry that MLAs are receiving their full salary. What possible justification can there be for paying them a full salary 13 months after collapsing the Assembly?

Karen Bradley: I warmly agree with my hon. Friend. W e need to make sure that the Good Friday agreement has “failed” and “outlived its use”? Will she take this opportunity to reassert the Government’s view that nothing—no Brexit ideology and no attempt to justify instituting a new border—should jeopardise this carefully brokered peace settlement and that the Government are fully, 100% behind the Good Friday agreement?

Karen Bradley: I warmly agree with my hon. Friend. The British and Irish Governments are the guardians of the Good Friday agreement, but its owners are the people of Ireland, north and south, who overwhelmingly endorsed it in referendums. Does the Secretary of State agree that it cannot be usurped by this House, by any party or by any individual in it, and that she will work for its full implementation, alongside the Irish Government?

Karen Bradley: I do agree.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): By how much is my right hon. Friend going to cut their pay?

Karen Bradley: A quick answer deserves another quick question, does it not, Mr Speaker? Mr Trevor Reaney has made recommendations on the pay of Members of the Legislative Assembly, and I am considering those at the moment.
Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The common structures of the EU provided the basis of a peace in Ireland via the Good Friday agreement. Is not the reality that the British Government have failed to recognise that in their Brexit positioning and that maintaining the agreement has been a secondary consideration?

Karen Bradley: I do not agree with that assessment.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): As has been said, in the past 48 hours, a couple of Members of this House and a British MEP have attacked the Good Friday agreement as “failed” and “unsustainable”. Will the Secretary of State join the Tanaiste, Ireland’s Deputy Prime Minister, in condemning such language as “irresponsible”?

Karen Bradley: As I say, I can only set out the Government’s position, which is that we fully support the Belfast agreement.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): A young generation in Ireland, north and south, and on the mainland have no recollection of violence because of the Good Friday agreement. Therefore, does the Secretary of State agree that those who are playing fast and loose with that agreement for their own terms over Brexit should not be doing so?

Karen Bradley: I agree that people do not remember what it was like; my children visited Northern Ireland recently and were astonished to see that there are still walls between communities. That was a shock to them because they had no idea about what the troubles were like and what it was like for people living there. The people of Northern Ireland have come so far in 20 years, and it is vital that we restore devolved government and maintain the Belfast agreement.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): In situations such as this, we will always get verbal excess or an aspirational wheeze from some of the participants. Will the Secretary of State indicate clearly that nowhere in the Good Friday agreement, the St Andrews agreement, the legislation that underpins them or the constitution do not continue to be led by the nose by Sinn Féin, a party that does not have the interests of Northern Ireland at heart but seeks only the destruction of the three-stranded approach very strictly.

Karen Bradley: We have been clear that the three-stranded approach has applied in everything we have been doing. Strand I issues clearly do not involve the Irish Government. The hon. Gentleman will know that the best way to ensure the protection of the Union and that the people of Northern Ireland have their say is the restoration of devolved government in Stormont.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I urge the Secretary of State to get off the fence in respect of same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland. We simply would not tolerate such discrimination against any other group of UK citizens. It is not acceptable that the Government continue to be complicit in discrimination against LGBT people in Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State support efforts in this place to bring forward change?

Karen Bradley: This is a devolved matter. I was proud to vote for same-sex marriage for my constituents in this House when we had that vote, but I did not vote to impose same-sex marriage in Scotland. It is not the job of this Government to introduce legislation; it is for the people of Northern Ireland and their elected politicians to make the decision.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Given the Secretary of State’s stated determination to reinstate devolved government in Northern Ireland, does she agree that perhaps the time has come for the appointment of an external mediator to chair the power-sharing talks?

Karen Bradley: I have been clear that I rule nothing out. Everything is under review and I will look at all viable options to ensure that we get devolved government back up and running.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): In situations such as this, we will always get verbal excess or an aspirational wheeze from some of the participants. Will the Secretary of State indicate clearly that nowhere in the Good Friday agreement, the St Andrews agreement, the legislation that underpins them or the constitution of this country is there provision for joint authority?

Karen Bradley: I fully respect the Belfast agreement and the successor agreements. We adhere to the three-stranded approach very strictly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. In the light of the failure of the talks and what has ultimately happened, the vacuum has been filled by those who wish to bring about more Dublin interference in Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State assure us that Dublin will have no say in the running and governance of Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: My priority, focus and energies are on the restoration of devolved government in line with the Belfast agreement. That is what I will be focusing on and that is what I am determined to achieve, alongside addressing the urgent issues, including the budget, that need to be dealt with in the very near future.
Aid Sector: Safeguarding

4.47 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on my Department’s response to the sexual abuse and exploitation perpetrated by charity workers in Haiti in 2011, and on the measures we are taking to improve safeguarding across the aid sector.

Let me start by paying tribute to Sean O’Neill of The Times and to the two sets of whistleblowers—those in 2011 and later—for bringing this case to light. On 9 February, The Times reported that when certain Oxfam staff were in Haiti in 2011, they had abused their positions of trust and paid for sex with local women. The incidents happened in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in 2010 that killed hundreds of thousands of people and left millions more homeless and reliant on aid for basic needs such as food and shelter. That is shocking, but it is not by itself what has caused such concern about Oxfam’s safeguarding—it was what Oxfam then did.

In chaotic and desperate situations, the very best safeguarding procedures and practices must be put in to place to prevent harm, but when organisations fail to report and follow up incidents of wrongdoing that occur, it undermines trust and sends a message that sexual exploitation and abuse are tolerated. We cannot prevent sexual exploitation and abuse if we do not demonstrate zero tolerance. In such circumstances, we must be able to trust organisations not only to do all they can to prevent harm, but to report and follow up incidents of wrongdoing when they occur.

In that duty Oxfam failed, on the watch of Barbara Stocking and Penny Lawrence. They did not provide a full report to the Charity Commission. They did not provide a full report to their donors. They did not provide any report to prosecuting authorities. In my view, they misled, quite possibly deliberately, even as their report concluded that their investigation could not rule out the allegation that some of the women involved were actually children. They did not think it was necessary to report that to the police either in Haiti or in the country of origin of those accountable. I believe that their motivation appears to be the protection of the organisation’s reputation. They put that before those they were there to help and protect, which is a complete betrayal of trust, a betrayal of those who sent them there—the British people—and a betrayal of all those Oxfam staff and volunteers who put the people they serve first.

Last week, I met Mark Goldring, chief executive of Oxfam, and Caroline Thomson, Oxfam’s chair of trustees. I made three demands of them: that they fully co-operate with the Haitian authorities, handing over all evidence they hold; that they report staff members involved in the incident to their respective national Governments; and that they make clear how they will handle any forthcoming allegations around safeguarding, historical or live. I stressed that, for me, holding to account those who made the decision not to report, and to let those potentially guilty of criminal activity slip away, was a necessity in winning back confidence in Oxfam.

As a result of those discussions, Oxfam has agreed to withdraw from bidding for any new UK Government funding until the Department for International Development is satisfied that it can meet the high safeguarding standards we expect of our partners. I will take a decision on current programming after 26 February—at that time, I will have further information that will help me to decide whether I need to adjust how that is currently delivered.

Given the concerns about the wider sector this case has raised, I have written to every UK charity working overseas that receives UK aid—192 organisations—insisting that they spell out the steps they are taking to ensure that their safeguarding policies are fully in place, and that they confirm that they have referred all concerns they have about specific cases and individuals to the relevant authorities, including prosecuting authorities. I have set the deadline of 26 February for replies. We are also conducting in parallel an exercise to make clear our standards to all non-UK charity partners—393 organisations in total—and to all our suppliers, including those in the private sector, which number more than 500 organisations, and to remind them of their obligations. We are doing the same with all multilateral partners.

The UK Government reserve the right to take whatever decisions about present or future funding for Oxfam or any other organisation we deem necessary. We have been very clear that we will not work with any organisation that does not live up to the high standards on safeguarding and protection that we require. We will share this approach with other Governments Departments responsible for ODA spend. Although that work is not yet complete, it is clear from the Charity Commission reporting data, and lack of it from some organisations, that cultural change is needed to ensure that all that can be done to stop sexual exploitation in the aid sector is being done.

We need to take some practical steps and set up our own systems now—we should not wait for the United Nations to take action. My Department and the Charity Commission will hold a safeguarding summit on 5 March, where we will meet UK international development charities, regulators and experts to confront safeguarding failures and agree practical measures, such as an aid worker accreditation scheme that we in the UK can use. Later in the year, we will take this programme of work to a wide-ranging global safeguarding conference to drive action across the whole aid and International Sector. I am pleased to say that the US, Canada, Netherlands and others have already agreed to support our goals of improving safeguarding standards across the sector. The UK is not waiting for others to act and will take the lead.

We have been speaking to colleagues across Government and beyond about what more we can do to stop exploitation and abuse in the UN and the broader multilateral system. The message from us to all parts of the UN is clear: they can either get their house in order, or they can prepare to carry out their good work without our money.

We welcome the UN’s announcement on 14 February that it does not and will not claim immunity for sexual abuse cases. That sends a clear signal that the UN is not a soft target, but we must hold it to account for that. Further actions we have taken in the past week include the creation of a new safeguarding unit. We have also promoted our whistleblowing and reporting phone line to encourage anyone with information on safeguarding issues to contact us. We have appointed Sheila Drew Smith, a recent member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, who has agreed to bring her expertise and her challenge to support my Department’s ambition on
I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has written to taxpayer-funded charities to ask for written assurance that they have safeguards in place, but I am not convinced that that will do the job. We need each charity to tell us how many cases they are aware of, how they have been resolved and whether there could be others. We need a full, sector-wide picture to be reported back to Parliament. The inquiry must target not only UK charities funded by DFID, but private suppliers, UN agencies, non-governmental organisations in developing countries and charities funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK embassies and other Government Departments. The Secretary of State says that she has asked those agencies for assurance. Will she tell us the timeframe for that?

I welcome the Secretary of State’s swift commitment to a safeguarding summit on 5 March. Out of that summit must now come a real commitment to reform: tightening international criminal regulations; establishing a global passport or register for humanitarian workers; and setting up an independent regulator or a centre of excellence. Will the Secretary of State tell us exactly when later on this year that will happen, so that the House will know when to expect to see real reforms? Reform must not just improve tools and procedures. Our aid agencies are supposed to set an example and challenge the abuse of power—always, everywhere. Reform must also involve aid agencies themselves looking at their culture, redistributing power, challenging its abuses, and putting people before their reputation. This is what aid agencies must now do, and a Labour Government will help them to do it.

Over the past 10 days, some have tried to use this scandal and weaponise it to call for the UK to end its commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on aid. That is absolutely shameful. Our aid budget does not just save millions of lives: it is also our best chance to stop sexual abuse and exploitation. Taking Syria alone, in the first half of 2017, UK aid supported 4,687 survivors of sexual violence. Last year, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo alone, the UK got to help up to 1,979 survivors of sexual violence within the first 72 hours. We owe it to those women and girls to keep some perspective. When an abuse scandal hits Westminster, the Church or the Army, nobody seriously suggests shutting the whole thing down. So let us root out the bad apples, focus on fixing the system, and have the conviction to stand up proudly for the good that UK aid can still do, which, even at this darkest moment, far exceeds the evil.

The Secretary of State has said that she believes in aid, but I have not heard her call out those shameful opportunists, including her own predecessor and many in her own party, who have jumped on this scandal and attacked aid. Well, if she will not, then I will, because it is wrong. It does an injustice to our country and it will distract us from what really needs to happen—reforms that are badly, badly needed.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for the support that she has given to the sector, for her recognition of the good work that does actually go on and for her support—ongoing, I hope—for the practical measures that we are taking forward. There are many things that we can do to influence others, but we need to take some practical action. We need, at the very least, to get the UK aid sector in order, with a catalyst effect on others.
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is clear that my right hon. Friend has handled these shattering circumstances extremely well and correctly. Can she confirm that none of the trustees or senior management at Oxfam at the time of those dreadful events is still in post today? Will she join me in thanking the overwhelming majority of wonderful people of deep integrity who work in the development sector, often at some considerable risk to themselves, for the remarkable work they do in very difficult places, which reflects so well on Britain and our international development efforts?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for what he says. We should be proud of those people and what they do. I have made it clear to Oxfam that we cannot have confidence in an organisation that still has sitting on its board or among its employees people whose judgment was so fundamentally flawed. I note that following that discussion, Penny Lawrence left the organisation. The Charity Commission is conducting its own investigation, and I know it will be particularly concerned about the role of trustees. I am not going to call for resignations. We need to investigate and look at the facts, and we need to hold the individuals responsible for this accountable.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. The Scottish National party is horrified at these revelations. Any form of sexual misconduct is completely and utterly unacceptable. Today’s appearance by Oxfam and others before the International Development Committee has left many questions unanswered. There needs therefore to be a fuller inquiry into the reported sickening events in Haiti and others emerging by the day. Allegations have now been made against Médecins sans Frontières, the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee. We hear a lot of apologies, but we need deeds to match those words.

Sadly, a picture has now emerged of a culture of bullying, harassment, sexual abuse and racism among agencies around the world. All the good and essential work of this vital sector has been deeply damaged by not just what has happened but the way it has been dealt with. We heard today that many individuals responsible for these appalling activities were not dealt with and instead were often just passed on to other agencies and charities. There clearly has to be accountability and safeguards put in place to rebuild that trust. Wherever we see this type of behaviour, whether in the aid sector, Hollywood or politics, it must not be tolerated.

It is deeply concerning that some members of this Government have not shied away from their desire to see the aid budget cut. This scandal must not be used by the Secretary of State as a tool for cutting aid funding. I therefore call on her to confirm today in this House unequivocally that organisations will not have funds unduly stripped from them as they go about their vital work in some of the most vulnerable communities on this earth.

The international aid sector does fantastic work, and we cannot let this scandal overshadow the overwhelmingly positive actions done and support given around the world by many. However, we need to get to the root of these events and make sure, with robust safeguards, that they never happen again, or if they do, that action is taken immediately.

Penny Mordaunt: It was this Government who brought in the 0.7% target. We think that is right and has helped, and that other nations around the world look to us as a development superpower. If we want to meet the sustainable development goals, we need to ensure that we spend that money
really well. I want to get the money to work harder: there are always improvements we can drive. We are committed to the 0.7% target.

On the hon. Gentleman’s final point, I will wait until I have information back, not just about Oxfam, but about all other delivery partners to which I may transfer work. Until I have that information, I will not make decisions about current programming, because the welfare of beneficiaries and the safety of staff in the field are my prime concerns.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the truly amazing work she is doing. That is quite often said in this House, but having sat through three and a half hours in the Select Committee listening to Oxfam, I came away realising how appalling the situation really is. May I, however, urge her not to leap into action too quickly, given, horrifyingly, that we have no understanding at the moment of the size of the problem? It is quite possible that predatory individuals, including predatory paedophiles, actually go into international situations, as they go into domestic situations, to abuse others. While I do not want to taint the people who go into such professions either in the UK or internationally, we may very well be on the precipice of a much bigger problem than simply Oxfam and a few others.

Penny Mordaunt: I note my hon. Friend’s concerns, but I think we do need to act now. This has obviously been triggered by a specific case, but we have known for a long time that this is a problem. It is a difficult problem to crack, but we have to start making moves to crack it. Having spoken to my opposite numbers in other nations, I can tell him that they are of the same mind. By getting to grips with this—putting in measures that will not by themselves solve the problem, but will help—we will also send a message to predatory individuals that the aid sector is not a safe haven for them.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and I commend her for her swift action over the past 10 days. This morning, the Select Committee decided that we will hold a full inquiry into this issue. Does she agree with me that as well as Oxfam having to get its house in order and the action that DFID needs to take, international action will be crucial if we are to prevent another such crisis ever happening again in the future?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I thank him for the hearing this morning and for the inquiry that he is going to undertake, which will help the situation dramatically. He is right: we can get our own house in order and take a lead on this, but, ultimately, the component parts of the UN and other organisations in the international community must also follow suit. We also have to tackle the other enormous issues on the fringe of what we are discussing—in particular, UN peacekeeping troops. These are not easy things to crack, but we have to crack them.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Many thousands of incredible people work in the aid sector, helping some of the most vulnerable people on the planet, and it is the betrayal of trust in organisations such as Oxfam that I think has caused the current outcry. Not only has Oxfam tried to cover up sex crimes by its workers, but in doing so it has shown a flagrant disregard for the criminal justice system in Haiti. Should the UK Government ever be working with an organisation that thinks it is above the law in one of the poorest countries in the world, such as Haiti?

Penny Mordaunt: This case is truly shocking and it may be that prosecutions result from what has gone on. We need to take stock of the sector, which is why I commissioned the review of what our partners are doing. It is also absolutely vital that we are very clear with any organisation we work with about what we expect from them. We often say “zero tolerance”, but we have to live that and mean that, and there have to be consequences when people breach the requirements we have of them. I said last week in Stockholm at the End Violence against Children conference that there is no organisation too big, or our work with them too complex, that we will not withhold funding from them if they do not meet those standards.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. She will know that this morning’s Select Committee meeting highlighted not only the really grotesque actions of a number of Oxfam staff in Haiti in 2011, but the fact that the whole sector has been far too slow to address the issue of sexual abuse and exploitation. Does she agree that at this stage three things are important: first, there has to be full accountability; secondly, action needs to be taken internationally, and an international register of humanitarian workers would help with that; and, thirdly, recognising the vital work the vast majority of aid workers do, nothing must be done to jeopardise UK aid to some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world?

Penny Mordaunt: Yes, yes and yes.

Anna Soubry (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for her statement and gently say to the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) that this is not an issue on which anybody should be seeking to make any form of political capital. This is not the subject of party politics; this is an appalling situation. About a year ago, I went to the Zaatar refugee camp as a guest of Oxfam. I saw the great work that so many of its workers do. Those workers represent the majority of people who work for our great British charities. Can the Secretary of State assure us all that the action she has to take—nobody disputes that—will not affect the beneficiaries of that work and that their interests will be absolutely paramount?

Penny Mordaunt: I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. That is why, although Oxfam has said it will not bid for any new funding, I have paused what I am going to do with current programming until I have assurances about every other partner operating in the same theatres. I will then take a decision on whether I can have confidence in what Oxfam is currently doing in those locations, or whether I need to adjust how we are doing that aid delivery.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I completely share the horror and revulsion about the revelations. I praise the Secretary of State for
the very robust and comprehensive way in which she has handled the situation over the past 10 days. As a former Oxfam staff member, I feel let down. I know that many current Oxfam staff members feel completely let down, too, by both the actions of those who carried out these terrible incidents and by the failure to deal with them robustly at the time. The Secretary of State mentioned the situation regarding UN peacekeeping. That area has long been on public record as one where there has been serious sexual abuse and exploitation, with the use of prostitutes and all sorts of terrible things. Will she say a little more about the conversation she is going to have with the Defence Secretary and others about how we can ensure very high standards, in particular when UK funding is being used to support that important work, where there have been serious abuses?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. It is good that the message has gone out from this House that we recognise the good work that is done by many people working and volunteering for Oxfam. We can all go into our local Oxfam shop and give them our support at the weekend, and we should do that. We should recognise that our armed forces have already done a lot to raise the standards of peacekeeping. We do a huge amount of capacity building. We do a huge amount of work to address gender-based violence and exploitation and to enable people to recover in the aftermath of conflict and war. We have huge expertise and I am very interested in how we can use that expertise. I have spoken to other nations with similar programmes, such as Canada, to see what we can do to help to raise standards. I am open to ideas, but that is the nature of the conversation I will be having with the Defence Secretary.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on taking a firm and robust stance from day one. Some charities may feel that there is a disincentive in the system to being open and transparent because of the need to bid for Government money and to appeal to the generous British public. Does she agree that the reputation of the big charities, as well as their outcomes, depends on being open and transparent, and not having obfuscation and cover-up?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with my hon. Friend. If any charity thinks that it is a good idea to put their reputation before their beneficiaries, they need to look at what is happening to Oxfam now. It is also important to set a culture in which people are not afraid to report. Ironically, Oxfam is one of the better organisations for reporting numbers to the Charity Commission. I am also looking at where there are gaps, with organisations not reporting incidents and concerns. Reporting and numbers are not necessarily a bad thing, but it is about the practices surrounding that and what organisations do when they know that something has gone wrong.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, her actions on the horrific events and her assurance that the Government’s commitment to helping the world’s poorest is undimmed. This is not only a charity sector problem, a parliamentary problem, or a Hollywood problem; it is a pervasive, persistent problem across sectors, society and the world. Vulnerable people—mostly women and children—are sexually objectified, exploited and abused by people with power, who are mostly men. Given the cross-cutting nature of this gendered violence, what discussions is the Secretary of State having across Government to take action to change the culture on sexual harassment and abuse across the board and to ensure that systems are in place to hold perpetrators to account?

Penny Mordaunt: As the hon. Lady will appreciate, in the immediate case I am concerned with a small slice of that, but I have been asking questions about how we hold Government Departments to account for our safeguarding work. I have also strengthened our whistleblowing practices with external oversight and, as I mentioned in my statement, we have written to other Government Departments that administer official development assistance spend.

This is a cultural change, and the Nolan principles of public life can help with the work that the Government do. Since 2013, we have had the UN’s code of conduct enshrined in our staff behaviour rules, and now that this incident has come to light, we are strengthening those rules by making explicit what we expect from all our staff. It does not matter whether prostitution is legal in a country or not; if someone is working for us, they cannot take part in those activities.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State stress that her Department makes no distinction about where a charity gets its money from—whether it is from Government or the charitable giving of British citizens—and that we will judge a charity by its deeds?

When bad happens, as in the Oxfam case, the real victims are not Oxfam, which has now lost 7,000 subscribers, but the people on the ground, such as those in Haiti. They are the ones who really suffer.

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The beneficiaries of aid are the victims in the Oxfam scandal, not anyone else. I absolutely recognise that individuals and members of the public will judge charities on how they respond, how they operate and their practices and responsibilities towards their beneficiaries. My Department has a particular responsibility to investigate those who are in receipt of UK aid, and the Charity Commission will look at the whole sector.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Following the International Development Committee’s hearing this morning, a number of areas for immediate action were raised. One was about charities’ ability to do a Disclosure and Barring Service check—formerly a Criminal Records Bureau check—for all their workers. Will the Secretary of State take immediate action to ensure that they can do that by including them as a regulated class of profession?

Secondly, we were told today that Interpol is ready to open up a register but lacks the finances to do so. Will the Secretary of State ensure that we put all resources into Interpol to make sure that that register is open, to stop paedophiles working in this sector?

Penny Mordaunt: The summit on 5 March will consider what we think needs to happen in the UK aid sector, so it might look at such checks or accreditation schemes and what form they should take. When I was in Stockholm
I also touched base with the National Crime Agency’s liaison officer to Interpol and discussed the issue briefly. Funding an Interpol system might not be the answer, but this is an important issue and we cannot deliver our work unless we can ensure that the vulnerable are protected, so we need to resource that.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I am pleased that the Secretary of State mentioned Oxfam shops because, as she will know, they can operate only because an army of volunteers selflessly and kindly give up their time. Does she agree that the Government should do all they can to ensure that those people are in no way undermined by the wicked actions of a few people?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. We can show our support for those individuals, who are good people and will be dismayed by what the leadership of their organisation has done. I think that they and the public have this issue in balance, because we know that this is not representative of the UK charity sector. We have a unique charity sector in this country—it is a jewel—and this is a stain on it. This is about a minority of individuals, but unless we really tackle these issues, the whole sector will be tarnished. I think that we can all show our support for those individuals who give up their time to do good work.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): By 2019, next year, we will have helped 7.8 million people in Nigeria have better nutrition. What contingency arrangements does the Secretary of State have in place to ensure that those projects will continue if Oxfam has to withdraw?

Penny Mordaunt: As I have said, I am reviewing all the partners we work with. If during the course of the investigation further things come to light that raise concerns about our ability to deliver aid in a particular location, I want to be sure that we have alternatives available, assessed and in place. We will have those answers after 26 February. I again assure the House that, whatever I do, no recipient of aid will suffer as a consequence.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. How quickly will the perpetrators’ crimes be recorded with all the appropriate agencies here in the UK so that they cannot go on to commit these crimes again?

Penny Mordaunt: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady is referring to the Oxfam case. That case is obviously an issue for Haiti, but I have also made it a requirement that Oxfam reports those individuals to their own national Governments, and that has taken place. When these incidents arise, or if organisations receive serious allegations, they should report them to their donors and to their equivalent of the Charity Commission, but it is very clear that they must also report them to their prosecuting authorities.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the personal grip that she has taken on the issue. She is the named individual in Her Majesty’s Government who has taken responsibility for tackling this. If it is not the Secretary-General, who is the named individual in the United Nations who should be gripping this issue in the way that she has done in this country?

Penny Mordaunt: The Secretary-General is the leader. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East spoke to him last week, and I spoke to his deputy in person. In the wake of this, they have clarified—if I may put it that way—their line on the issue. But we must also be concerned about the practical realities of them delivering that. We can talk to them and get assurances, press statements and letters, but it is the component parts of the UN that actually have to comply with those requirements. I am afraid that the only way we will do that is by dealing with them directly and, if we are not satisfied, withholding funding from those organisations.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State share my concern about the fact that other Ministers, and the Charity Commission, were made aware of worries over safeguarding back in 2015, but no action was taken at that stage? Does it also concern her that the loophole relating to charity shops, as retail venues, remains? That does not apply to Oxfam, which changed its procedures once the activity was discovered to have occurred, but it may persist in the case of other charities. The Secretary of State does not seem to be concerned about that. Will she let us know why?

Finally, does the Secretary of State appreciate that, notwithstanding her assurances, many of my constituents—a number of whom have been employed by Oxfam as international development workers—are desperately concerned about the weaponising of these revelations by people wishing to argue against international aid, and that their concerns should not be dismissed out of hand?

Penny Mordaunt: First, I can assure the hon. Lady that, in respect of the Oxfam case, the Charity Commission was not informed. In fact—I think that this is important—the commission has described the circumstances of which I have informed the House today as “inappropriate sexual behaviour”, “harassment”, and the bullying of employees. That is not in any way an accurate reflection of the events that took place.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), the Civil Society Minister, is looking into all these issues, including the extension of checks to all retail outlets. I think that there are probably smarter ways of doing this, and if we find that if there is more to be done, we will need to do it.

I am sorry, but I cannot remember the hon. Lady’s last point. [HON. MEMBERS: “You have done it.”] Okay—thanks.

Mr Speaker: I know that this involves the constituency of the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), but unfortunately—forgive me—if a question is too long, it is quite easy for a Minister to forget some of it. There is a lesson there. The hon. Lady is an extremely dexterous contributor, and we all learn from these situations.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the heroism of many aid workers in difficult circumstances, it is literally tragic to hear of a handful who decided to exploit such
a situation to fulfil their own sexual proclivities. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me by telling me what work her Department’s new safeguarding review unit will do to ensure that people are protected throughout the aid sector?

**Penny Mordaunt:** We need to do several things, but, in a nutshell, we need to ensure that every organisation is doing all in its power to prevent such actions from taking place. But if and when they do take place—we must recognise that people are working with a huge number of organisations, including local organisations, in what is, quite frankly, chaos—we must ensure that they are reported and dealt with appropriately, that those who have done things wrong are held to account, and that the whole process is transparent.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State envisage that an international register of aid workers will bring the capability to strike off abusers and ensure that they can no longer find work in the aid sector?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Yes. Since this story broke, we have received a number of suggestions from a number of organisations. We need to decide what we in the UK think is the best course of action, and that is what we will do on 5 March, with experts and representatives of the UK sector. We will then share that work with our fellow nations and do something together. That is the plan of action.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): Are robust vetting systems in place not just for DFID officials working abroad, but for the charities that tend to work abroad in such dreadful situations?

**Penny Mordaunt:** We have good practices and procedures in place, and I have confidence in what my Department does. However, we work not only with the Oxfams and the Save the Childrens of this world, but with a raft of other organisations further down the supply chain. We must ensure that we can have confidence in the whole of that process. There are individuals whom we can accredit and register, but that will not be possible in the case of other partners on the ground, so we must also ensure that we have the right oversight wherever in the world we are working.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Extremely serious though they are, we should not allow these ongoing revelations to be used as a pretext to undermine the UK’s financial commitment to overseas development aid. A significant number of influential people who are now being vocal on the issue seem to be trying to exploit them for that, and I welcome the Secretary of State’s reassurances in that regard. Does the Secretary of State share my concern about the ulterior motives of certain people of influence, who are conveniently jumping on this issue, despite being silent on other forms of abuse and sexual exploitation when they occur in other sectors and other parts of our society?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I do not think that is how people are responding to this situation; I think the bulk of people in this House and in the country want us to get a grip on this particular issue. As I said, we are committed to 0.7%—we introduced it; it has been in our manifesto; we are committed to it. We are also committed to spending it really well and ensuring that, in spending it, we are working with organisations that we can trust and that put their beneficiaries first.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, her determination and her strength of character. A whistleblower hotline has been set up; can the Secretary of State assure this House that those who use it will not be disadvantaged in employment as a result, and can she confirm whether there has been any usage of the hotline so far?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hotline itself is not new. It has been in place for some years, and it is a discrete unit, so people are dealt with in complete confidence; neither I, the permanent secretary nor any other part of the organisation are aware of calls that come in, and they are investigated separately and discreetly, but once investigations are concluded, we obviously know the result of them. So, yes, it has been used, and it has been very effective. As I said in my statement, through our interrogation of that system on historical cases, we can say that all those cases have been dealt with appropriately.
Post-18 Education

5.37 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the review of post-18 education and funding. While I am not announcing new policy today, I welcome the opportunity to confirm to the House details of a major review across post-18 education and funding, as announced by the Prime Minister yesterday.

Before I discuss the specifics of the review, I should highlight some of the strengths and successes of our existing post-18 system. We have a world-class higher education system. Sixteen British universities are in the world’s top 100 and four are in the top 10. We have record numbers of young people entering university, including from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our student finance system removes up-front financial barriers and provides protections for borrowers so that they only have to contribute when they can afford to do so. A university degree provides significant financial returns to the individual: graduates on average benefit from their university education by over £100,000 over their lifetime.

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 sets the foundation for further improvements, with the Office for Students a strong voice for students and to ensure minimum standards. The director for fair access and participation will help to drive social mobility. The teaching outcomes and excellence framework measures are in the legislation as well, as is the facilitation of further diversity with new providers and shorter degrees delivered at a lower cost to students.

The Technical and Further Education Act 2017 extends the responsibilities of the Institute for Apprenticeships to include technical education, as well as introducing degree-level apprenticeships. New institutes of technology will be established, which will focus on higher-level technical skills and will be eligible for access to loans and grants for their students. T-levels are in development—a true, equal-standing alternative to A-levels.

We will build on those important reforms in this review. We will also look at parts of the system that are not working as well as they could be. Although we have seen further growth in three-year degrees for 18-year-olds, the post-18 system does not always offer a comprehensive range of high-quality alternative routes for the many young people who pursue a technical or vocational path at that stage. In universities, we have not seen the extent of increase in choice that we would have wanted. The great majority of courses are priced at the same level and three-year courses remain the norm. Meanwhile, although the funding system is a progressive one with built-in protections, those elements are not always well understood.

It is for those reasons that the Government are committed to conducting this major review to look further at how we can ensure that our post-18 education system is joined up and supported by a funding system that works for students and taxpayers. The review will look at four key strands: choice and competition across post-18 education and training; value for money for graduates and taxpayers; accessibility of the system to all; and delivering the skills that our country needs now and in the future. This means identifying ways to help people to make the most effective choices between the options available at and after 18, so that they can make more informed decisions about their futures. It is also about ensuring that there is a more diverse range of options to choose from beyond the classic three-year or four-year undergraduate degrees.

We will look at how students and graduates contribute to the cost of their studies, to ensure that funding arrangements across post-18 education are transparent and do not prevent people from accessing higher education or training. We will examine how we can best ensure that people from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to progress and succeed in post-18 education, including considering how disadvantaged students receive maintenance support, both from the Government and from universities and colleges. We will look at how we can best support education outcomes that deliver our industrial strategy ambitions by contributing to a strong economy and delivering the skills our country needs.

We are clear that we must maintain and protect key elements of our current post-18 education system that work well already. We will maintain the principle that students should contribute to the cost of their studies, and we will not place a cap on the number of students who can benefit from post-18 education. We will not regress to a system like that in Scotland, where controls on student numbers continue to restrict the aspirations of young people.

The review will be informed by independent advice from an expert panel from across post-18 education, business and academia chaired by Philip Augar, a financial author and former non-executive director of the Department for Education. To inform its advice, the panel will carry out extensive consultation and engagement with the sector, with business and with, among others, people currently or recently participating in post-18 education. The panel will publish its report at an interim stage, before the Government conclude the overall review in early 2019.

The UK is truly a world-leading destination for study and research. Record numbers of young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are entering university. However, we recognise the concerns and we must look at how we can go further to provide choice, to open up access and to deliver value for money for students and taxpayers. We must ensure that the system as a whole is delivering the best possible outcomes for young people and the economy, joining up the vocational, technical and academic routes and supported by a fair and sustainable funding system. I commend this statement to the House.

5.43 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement.

I welcome the Prime Minister’s admission yesterday that the system is not working. She rightly talked about the choices facing a working-class teenage girl today. I faced those choices as a working-class teenage girl myself, but every part of the education system that helped me has been attacked by this Government. I want to ask the Secretary of State first to clarify one simple point. He has claimed that there are now record numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds,
but the House of Commons Library has confirmed today that, when we include part-time students, there are now 10,000 fewer students from under-represented areas than there were before the Government raised tuition fees to £9,000 a year. And as usual, the rest of the Secretary of State’s announcement leaves us with more questions than answers.

Let us start with the most important question. Will the review be able to recommend extra funding for education overall? The terms of reference state that it cannot make recommendations on tax and that it must follow the Government’s fiscal policies. Does that mean that the review cannot recommend anything that would increase spending? If so, can the review consider restoring maintenance grants, reducing interest rates or increasing the teaching grant? Can the Secretary of State also confirm that the terms of reference make it clear that it is not an independent review at all but one directly run by his Ministers? Given that, will he ensure that the review’s recommendations are put to this House and implemented in primary legislation that we can properly discuss and amend?

The Prime Minister admitted that the current system “leaves students from the lowest-income households bearing the highest levels of debt”. Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that that will always be the case with a system entirely based on loans? Does he agree with his predecessor, who has admitted that this Government were wrong to scrap maintenance grants?

Speaking to The Sunday Times, the Secretary of State said that he wants differential fees, with higher prices for subjects with the greatest earning potential. Is that policy, or was the Government’s Education Secretary not speaking for the Government? Does he understand that charging higher fees for the very courses that lead to the highest-paid jobs makes no economic sense and only widens inequality? So much for social mobility.

The Conservative party manifesto promised a review of tertiary education across the board, yet further education colleges form no part of this review, despite the hundreds of thousands of people aged 16 to 18 studying in them. Have this Government abandoned yet another manifesto commitment?

Can the Secretary of State also tell us whether student nurses are covered by the review? If not, will he give this House a debate and a vote on the regulations he is trying to sneak through to abolish their bursaries? He said that he wants funding arrangements to be transparent. The Treasury Committee, chaired by another of his predecessors, found the funding arrangements to be anything but. The Committee highlighted the “fiscal illusion” at the heart of the system, with up to £7 billion of annual debt write-offs simply missing, allowing the Government to artificially reduce the deficit by saddling young people with debt. Perhaps he can tell us whether he will take up the Committee’s recommendations. Will he finally tell us the latest estimate of the resource accounting and budgeting charge and about how it will be written off?

The truth is that a year-long review is an unnecessary waste of time and energy when action is needed now. Let me offer the Secretary of State a simple conclusion to his review: a fully costed plan to scrap tuition fees, to bring back maintenance support and to reverse the rest of the Government’s cuts to education. It is called “For the many, not the few” and that is exactly what our education system should be.

**Damian Hinds:** I thank the hon. Lady very much indeed for her response. She asked a number of questions and I will try to get through as many of them as I can. She is right to identify the issues of part-time participation in higher education. One of the things the review will look at is the ways in which it is possible to carry on earning in the labour force while studying. The decline in part-time study predates the 2012 reforms and indeed the change of Government in 2010, so we need to look at some of the underlying causes.

The hon. Lady asked what the review will cover. The review will cover the complete range, but the Government also believe in a framework of fiscal responsibility, and rightly so. It is only when we have a strong economy that we can have a strong education system and that we can carry on investing in our public services in the way that we are doing.

The hon. Lady asked whether it is an independent review. It is a Government review and the Government are ultimately responsible to this House and democratically. We make the decisions, but those decisions are informed and advised by an independent panel, the composition of which she knows. The legislative requirements that would follow from any changes would follow the normal processes. The same goes for the statutory instrument she asked about.

I do not want to take up too much time, but I want to set one important thing straight. When we talk about having different fees for different courses, it is about ensuring diversity and choice in the marketplace. That exists along many different axes, including shorter courses, more part-time courses and courses delivered in different ways. It is absolutely not the same as saying that there is some distinction of worth to be drawn between arts courses and science courses. With how the world economy is changing, it is also true that we are going to need more STEM graduates and more people with expertise in coding and so on, but that is a different point.

I will finish by observing that there is no such thing as “free” in higher education. Somebody must pay, and there are only two types of people who can fund higher education: those who have benefited from it and will typically earn much more over their lifetimes, and those who have not. There is a public subsidy that goes towards higher education that rightly reflects the societal benefit, but it is also right that the people who benefit contribute to the cost. The Labour alternative is to have the tab picked up entirely by other taxpayers, many of whom will not have benefited from the advantages. That is a regressive policy that would mean less money going to universities and fewer people going to university. It would be a policy for the few, not the many.

**Justine Greening:** Like many Members of this House, I was the first person in my family to go to university, and wonderful universities, such as the University of Roehampton in my constituency, are now giving many young local people the same opportunity. I welcome the fact that the panel will talk to young people, which is vital because they need certainty to be able to start making informed decisions about whether to go to university. I have two points. First, does my
right hon. Friend agree that social mobility must be at the heart of the panel’s thinking? Secondly, does he also agree that probably one of the worst things we could introduce would be the regressive tuition fee policy proposed by the official Opposition, which would benefit the best-off. In contrast, as she says, we should be focusing on what we can do to promote social mobility and build on the strides that we have made in terms of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds going on to study full-time at age 18. She also mentioned the requirement that young people, or indeed older people, applying to university have certainty now. It is important for us to keep stressing that university is a good deal. If you are someone who can benefit from a university package works. Scottish 18-year-olds from the most disadvantaged areas are now 67% more likely to apply for university. I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. The Prime Minister’s speech yesterday had plenty of platitudes and good intentions, but there has been absolutely nothing of substance. We have had an admission that the current system in England is not working for students. Admitting that it is wrong is one thing, but failing to correct the situation is simply incompetent. In Scotland, the Scottish National party has restored Scotland’s tradition of free higher education while maintaining the education maintenance allowance for those at school or in further education and the bursary for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education—[Interuption.] Contrary to the comments from the Government Benches, that support package works. Scottish 18-year-olds from the most disadvantaged areas are now 67% more likely to apply to higher education than 12 years ago, and they graduate with the lowest debt in the UK. Is it not time that we stopped the nonsense and abolished the fees, and matched not just Scotland but the rest of the developed world? Going to university should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

If the fees for some less expensive degree courses are lowered, as has been rumoured, has the Secretary of State considered how he will encourage young people to study the more expensive STEM subjects that are so desperately needed in the UK? We have already seen the impact of removing the nursing bursary, with applications to study nursing in England down by 23%. How will the Secretary of State ensure that that does not happen in STEM?

Both the Government and the Labour party are trying to rewrite the history of their responsibility for the tuition fees fiasco, and it is clear that Scotland is leading the policy debate in the UK. With the average debt on graduation in England now at £50,000, how will the Secretary of State ensure that a flow of talent from all backgrounds will continue? How will he ensure that the industrial strategy is supported? Is it not time that fees were abolished?

**Damian Hinds:** My right hon. Friend is of course completely right about the alternative policy proposed by the official Opposition, which would benefit the better-off. In contrast, as she says, we should be focusing on what we can do to promote social mobility and build on the strides that we have made in terms of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds going on to study full-time at age 18. She also mentioned the requirement that young people, or indeed older people, applying to university have certainty now. It is important for us to keep stressing that university is a good deal. If you are someone who can benefit from a university degree, we have a progressive system with plenty of protections in place, and if you can make the most of that, you should.

**Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP):** I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. The Prime Minister’s speech yesterday had plenty of platitudes and good intentions, but there has been absolutely nothing of substance. We have had an admission that the current system in England is not working for students. Admitting that it is wrong is one thing, but failing to correct the situation is simply incompetent. In Scotland, the Scottish National party has restored Scotland’s tradition of free higher education while maintaining the education maintenance allowance for those at school or in further education and the bursary for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education—[Interuption.] Contrary to the comments from the Government Benches, that support package works. Scottish 18-year-olds from the most disadvantaged areas are now 67% more likely to apply to higher education than 12 years ago, and they graduate with the lowest debt in the UK. Is it not time that we stopped the nonsense and abolished the fees, and matched not just Scotland but the rest of the developed world? Going to university should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

If the fees for some less expensive degree courses are lowered, as has been rumoured, has the Secretary of State considered how he will encourage young people to study the more expensive STEM subjects that are so desperately needed in the UK? We have already seen the impact of removing the nursing bursary, with applications to study nursing in England down by 23%. How will the Secretary of State ensure that that does not happen in STEM?

Both the Government and the Labour party are trying to rewrite the history of their responsibility for the tuition fees fiasco, and it is clear that Scotland is leading the policy debate in the UK. With the average debt on graduation in England now at £50,000, how will the Secretary of State ensure that a flow of talent from all backgrounds will continue? How will he ensure that the industrial strategy is supported? Is it not time that fees were abolished?

**Damian Hinds:** Additional support is already provided in England for some of those key subjects that have a higher cost attached to them, and the review will consider how to incentivise the take-up of such courses. As for the broader point, I said to the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) that, if there were to be a policy along the lines that she suggested, that would mean fewer people being able to go to university, less money going to universities and disadvantaged students being impacted. She only has to look to her left towards the SNP to see exhibit A of how that works.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Understandably, there is intense interest in this subject, but I advise the House that there is a ten-minute rule motion to follow and that I have been informed that it is the intention of one Member to oppose it. Thereafter, there is the Second Reading of a Bill, to which 20 hon. Members want to contribute. I must therefore insist that we do not have speeches or pre-conceived rants. What is required is a pithy question, and I know that the Secretary of State will provide a pithy answer. If people do not want to deliver that, then they should not bother taking part today, because it is not fair on colleagues. We can always be led in such a matter by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne).

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** How few students actually pay 6%?

**Damian Hinds:** The interest rate, to which I think my right hon. Friend is referring, is currently 6.1%, but it varies with inflation. Critically, it means that those who earn more in their 20s and 30s will pay more—[Interuption.] It applies throughout the study period, as the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) should know. Thereafter, the rate varies depending on earnings. It does serve an important purpose, but it cannot be considered in isolation from all the other aspects of the system.

**Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** I welcome the Secretary of State to his post, but will he take this matter seriously? Something is deeply wrong with higher education funding. Much has been achieved, but much needs to be reviewed. Will he concentrate on skills or giving incentives to further education colleges and private trainers—all those who are struggling at the moment.

**Damian Hinds:** Much achieved, but things to look at again—I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman, because that is precisely what we are doing. As for skills, some of the ones that we are looking for are being delivered extremely well, but we need to do more. That is why we have had the big expansion in apprenticeships, the Institute for Apprenticeships, the raising of standards and, of course, the introduction of the T-levels, which he will welcome.

**Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con):** I welcome the review and the direction of travel, but my right hon. Friend will know that a fifth to a third of graduates are not getting graduate jobs and that the number of state
school graduates has decreased in the past year. Is it not the case that our higher education system is not providing value for money for many disadvantaged people? That is why the review must focus on skills and on addressing social injustice.

**Damian Hinds:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the need to focus on skills and to have social justice and equal opportunity at the heart of things. I should also mention that those who do not earn above the threshold do not repay their loan, which is an intrinsic part of the system.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, three quarters of graduates will not repay their loans, so is it not the case that the system is not working for the taxpayer, let alone students? Therefore, would the Secretary of State have welcomed a more radical review that could have considered some of the deep-rooted problems of the current system?

**Damian Hinds:** I can understand why the hon. Lady asks that question, but part of the point of the system is that if someone does not earn up to a certain level, or if by the time 30 years have passed, someone has been out of the labour market, they are not expected to pay back the loan. That is deliberate, to ensure that the system is progressive and fair.

**Neil O’Brien** (Harborough) (Con): Thanks to the expansion that fees have enabled, the most disadvantaged students are now nearly twice as likely to go to university if they are in England than if they are in Scotland. I am in the first generation in my family to go to university and I want my constituents to have the same opportunity. Although I welcome the review, will the Secretary of State reassure me that we will not put that progress at risk?

**Damian Hinds:** I absolutely reassure my hon. Friend that ensuring equal and fair access will be at the heart of what we do.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Conservative party manifesto promised a review of tertiary education, so I welcome the Secretary of State’s review. However, when will he fulfil the promise to review the most underfunded part of our education system—16 to 18?

**Damian Hinds:** The internationally recognised definition of tertiary education is largely post-18. The hon. Gentleman is right about some of the challenges in post-16 education. A moment ago, I mentioned T-levels, for which considerably more funding will come forward. There is also the great expansion in apprenticeships.

**David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and strongly support his review. It is essential that we deliver the skills that our country needs, and give opportunities for all. Will he ensure that the concerns and views of business and industry are taken into account in the review?

**Damian Hinds:** It is vital that the views of industry and business are taken fully into account. I know that the independent panel will listen to them carefully.

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): The terms of reference that the Secretary of State published say that the review cannot make recommendations on tax policy and that it must make recommendations in keeping with the Government’s fiscal policies. Does that mean that there will be no new money for higher education regardless of the review’s recommendations?

**Damian Hinds:** As I said, we have a framework of fiscal responsibility, which we will stick to. The announcements on tax and spending are made at fiscal events, but the review has a wide remit to consider all the different aspects of the system and make recommendations.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The Secretary of State rightly stated the principle that those who benefit must contribute. Does he agree that the alternative is regressive and means a cap and a reduction in student numbers?

**Damian Hinds:** My hon. Friend is right and he has only to look north of the border to see how that works.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Secretary of State spoke about choices made at and after 18, but he will know that many students make those choices at 13 when they choose their GCSEs. The National Audit Office report on the higher education market identified high-quality careers advice and financial education as part of how we can fix the system. Will the review include that?

**Damian Hinds:** The hon. Lady is right to talk about the choices that are made early. That is why drawing attention to the so-called facilitating subjects can be useful for keeping people’s options open for higher education. The point also highlights why we need to make clear early in school the routes to technical and vocational as well as higher education.

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that high-quality apprenticeships are key to addressing the UK’s skills shortages?

**Damian Hinds:** I agree entirely. That is why we have such bold ambition for what we will do on apprenticeships—not just the numbers, but with the Institute for Apprenticeships, and moving from frameworks to standards to ensure that they deliver what business needs.

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): The creative industries generate more than £90 billion for the UK economy. Assessing the value of a university degree course on graduate salary or outcomes risks undermining that important sector. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that we support universities in producing world-class arts graduates?

**Damian Hinds:** The hon. Lady makes an important point and, of course, we do produce world-class arts graduates, and we have some of the finest institutions in the world doing that. On what she calls valuing degrees, I have said that at least three different considerations need to be taken account of: the cost of putting on the course, the value in earnings to the individual, and also the value to our society as well as our economy.
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am delighted that the review will address value for money for graduates. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the system does not currently have the transparency for students to make informed choices, and that that needs to be addressed?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have moved forward with what is called the LEO—longitudinal education outcomes—dataset to help students make those analyses directly, and indeed to help those who provide information on courses.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The madness of the current system is that it costs students and taxpayers a fortune. Student debt is spiralling up to £55 billion, nearly half of which will be written off and picked up by general taxpayers. I urge the Secretary of State to look forensically at how we knit together further education and higher education so that we radically expand the number of earn-while-you-learn degree places, which are collapsing in great cities such as Birmingham, where they have halved in the past 12 months alone.

Damian Hinds: That was a question of two halves. In the first half, I think the right hon. Gentleman was describing what is called sharing the cost, which we do. We believe that it is right that the individual who benefits should take on part of the investment, and the taxpayer also picks up part of it. I agree entirely with the points in the second half of the question: we should have proper join-up between HE and FE. Many universities already do important technical education, and many FE colleges also conduct very good HE. We want more of a join-up.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Many of us, from both sides of the Chamber, come from modest backgrounds and were the first in our families to go to university. Any kind of cap on numbers could seriously jeopardise the system. Will the review therefore ensure that the unintended consequences of popular but ultimately disastrous policy options are highlighted?

Damian Hinds: The review will look at a range of issues, but highlighting the downsides of some policies that may appear outwardly and initially attractive is an important part of that.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State guarantee that there will be no reduction in funding for widening participation and fair access programmes as part of the review?

Damian Hinds: As the hon. Gentleman will know, there has been some great progress in widening access in terms of social class and, for example, in terms of people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds going on to university. The access programmes that universities run are part of the reason for that. The director of fair access enables us to strengthen that further, learn from what works best and ensure that we spread best practice.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): We need to build 300,000 houses a year in this country. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that a high-quality apprenticeship in construction is an excellent alternative to incurring any debt through a university course?

Damian Hinds: Different people have different talents and orientations and enjoy different things, and it is important that we present a range. My hon. Friend is right to mention the particular requirement for construction and management skills, and the apprenticeship route is an important part of fulfilling that.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The review does not touch on the excessive salaries and pension pots that many vice-chancellors claim. Does the Secretary of State think that that is an insignificant factor in the current culture?

Damian Hinds: The overall remuneration of senior staff in institutions that have public support must also enjoy public confidence. The Office for Students will look at how we can ensure that that confidence is maintained.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the mention of apprenticeships and T-levels. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the review will cover the potential of institutions of technology to deliver them, particularly if one was built in South Devon College in Paignton?

Damian Hinds: I am not at this exact moment in a position to go into detail about Paignton, but I can confirm that institutes of technology are an important part of the piece.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the answer that the Secretary of State gave my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) on the international definition of tertiary education being post-18, I point out that the Conservative party manifesto included 16 to 18 education as tertiary. Although it is the Secretary of State’s prerogative to choose his timings for inquiries, will he give an actual date for the FE review, because colleges in Stoke-on-Trent want to know?

Damian Hinds: We are constantly improving things. The level 4 and 5 review that is going on will feed into the review that we are discussing. As I have said to several Members, we want to ensure that the two sides are joined up.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Yesterday, when I looked, there did not seem to be a readily accessible link on the website to the review team. If members of the public want to share the benefit of their views with Mr Augar, will the Secretary of State ensure that there is an accessible, emailable link?

Damian Hinds: I will indeed ensure that it is possible to do that. There will of course be a call for evidence as part of the process.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Secretary of State has simply criticised the Scottish Government and not taken the opportunity to learn from them. Will he join me in welcoming the 2017 UCAS figures, which show a 13% increase in students from Scotland’s most deprived communities going to a Scottish university, and the overall 2% increase in applicants to universities this year from the 20% most deprived areas compared with last year?
Damian Hinds: The gap in opportunity between the disadvantaged and the advantaged in Scotland is well known to all, including the commentators who look at it, and no plucking from the air of a favourite statistic is going to change that. The fact is that the system we have in England has been effective in helping disadvantaged people to make the most of their talents if they want to go on to higher education.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Student living costs are the most pressing issue at Keele University in my constituency and certainly elsewhere in the country, where it is much more expensive to rent and simply get by. Rather than waiting an age for the conclusions of this review, should the Government not simply address this issue now, as well as the sliding scale of access to maintenance loans and the reintroduction of maintenance grants?

Damian Hinds: Bringing in maintenance loans meant it was possible to get access to more cash, and we know the cash-flow question was an important consideration, especially in enabling disadvantaged students to stay at university. I confirmed in the statement that the review will look at all the different aspects of the system.

Points of Order

6.10 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman wants to raise a point of order, he may do so, but with sensitivity to the prevailing circumstances, with huge interest in the subsequent debate.

Neil Gray: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand the pressures on time, so I will be brief. I seek your advice on the public actions of a Member of this House. During a debate on 5 February on social security, the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), whom I have notified of this point of order, intervened on my speech to ask a question, which I was happy to answer. It later came to my attention that he had taken a video clip of his intervention and removed my reply, before stating publicly: “I got no answer to my repeated question”.

We are left to speculate about the motive for the removal of my reply, but that is not the basis of my complaint. By posting that clip and suggesting I had not answered his question, he misrepresented the proceedings of this House, and he directly challenged my character and reputation. After being challenged, he did post a full transcript of the debate, but I find deeply concerning. I have enjoyed frequent debates with him since he entered the House, and although we disagree politically, I get on well with him personally. However, I wonder whether this type of behaviour is acceptable according to you, Mr Speaker, or to the code of conduct. Can you therefore please advise whether it is in order for a Member to apparently attempt to mislead the public about proceedings in this House? Can you advise what powers you have to challenge this behaviour?

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I have just made a point about the constraints on time and it would be helpful if people would be sensitive to it, because it is about others; it is not just about what they want to do now. I am grateful to him for advance notice that he wished to raise this point. I note his concern and I understand what he has just told the House, which is that he has brought the matter to the attention of the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). I appreciate that Members in all parts of the House are increasingly using social media to draw attention to proceedings in this House, and that, of itself, is perfectly understandable. Moreover, broadly it is to be welcomed. That said, I urge all Members to take care to ensure that usage of selected clips of debates does not create a misleading impression of what has taken place. I might add that it is one thing for a Member to post a clip of what he or she has said, but to add evaluative commentary or to imply the absence of a reply to a point that that Member has made could fall into the category of knowingly misleading.

As for the code of conduct, what I would say to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) is that in the circumstance that he thinks there has been a
[Mr Speaker]

breach of it, the appropriate action is to write to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. I strongly suggest that he do so if he is so motivated and conviced, rather than pursuing the matter further on the Floor of the House. That ruling is relevant not just to the hon. Gentleman, to whom I am grateful for airing the issue, but to other Members. I must say to the House that it would not be desirable if we were regularly to have points of order of this kind. Already we have colleagues complaining about Members visiting their constituencies without prior notification and we do not want a whole new category of constant points of order on matters of this kind, so it is up to Members to help each other.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: If Dr Offord feels that his views need to be registered to the nation, so be it.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In December 2016, the British Government adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of “anti-Semitism”. This definition explains that claiming that the existence of the state of Israel is a racist and illegitimate endeavour is anti-Semitic. Therefore, by the Government’s own measure, the words “Israeli apartheid week” are manifestly anti-Semitic and violate this country’s own definition of anti-Semitism. Given that the Secretary of State and his team are here and that yesterday marked the beginning of Israeli Apartheid Week, may I ask you, Sir, how we can have a statement from the Government condemning these actions and, if appropriate, bringing forward the necessary legislation to prevent them?

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether a Minister is minded to make a statement on the matter, and I am not entirely sure which Minister the hon. Gentleman had in mind. The Secretary of State for Education is in his place, but it is not obvious to me that the matter is for the Secretary of State. Other Ministers are also present on the Treasury Bench and they will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has had to say. I suspect that what he has had to say will be communicated more widely to Members of the House. That ruling is relevant not just to the hon. Gentleman, but it is up to Members to help each other.

Postal Voting

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

6.15 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about postal voting at elections.

It is great privilege to present this Bill in the mother of all Parliaments, in one of the world’s great democracies. The representation of the people or postal handling Bill escalates two of Sir Eric Pickles’ recommendations made in his review of electoral fraud, which he undertook as part of his remit as the Government’s anti-corruption champion. There is no threat more insidious to a democratic society than electoral fraud, and it is almost beyond belief that so many allegations of fraudulent behaviour have been made during recent council, mayoral and general elections. It is clear that unscrupulous and devious people are intent on subverting the confidence of the electorate and damaging the sanctity of our ancient democracy. The events that occurred during the 2014 Tower Hamlets mayoral election are mercifully rare, but they show us that our democracy cannot be taken for granted. We need to accept that our trust-based electoral system is susceptible to fraudulent practices. International intergovernmental organisations such as the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights have raised their concerns over what they perceive to be vulnerabilities within the United Kingdom’s electoral systems, and it is essential that we act now.

Of course, fighting corruption and electoral fraud has benefits beyond protecting democracy and the suffrage of our citizens. Crime begets crime, and malfeasance and corruption, once they put down roots in an organisation or institution, are very hard to eradicate. An individual who has undermined the democratic process and attained elected office through casuistic means is unlikely to maintain ethical standards in office; they are likely to lapse into recidivistic tendencies, to the detriment of those they represent.

The law currently allows a voter to hand in their own and other peoples completed and sealed postal ballots to a polling station on polling day or to a returning officer on any day before polling day that is deemed to be too close to polling day to ensure that the postal service will be able to execute delivery of the postal ballot in time. The Electoral Commission has introduced a code of conduct that, in essence, states that no political activist should handle another person’s postal ballot papers, but the code is not enshrined in law.

At present, political activists and campaigners are still legally permitted to handle and deliver an unlimited number of postal ballots to polling stations. Although the simple act of handing in another person’s completed and sealed postal ballot could be completely innocuous, I am certain that most Members will at least be familiar with the concept of postal ballot harvesting. That practice involves political activists gathering up postal ballots, sometimes in their hundreds, and delivering them to polling stations on behalf of the local electorate. As these completed ballots are often handed in to polling stations on polling day, there is rarely a chance to ensure that they have not been tampered with or fraudulently completed by another party.
As Sir Eric Pickles noted in his report on electoral fraud, “Securing the ballot”, the lack of a statutory ban on the handling of postal ballots by political activists leaves scope for the integrity of the voting system to be undermined. Frankly, it is impossible to disagree. In recent years, and perhaps cultivated by increasingly partisan politics, there has been an escalation in instances of intimidation and threats against politicians, after greater schisms than ever between political factions, expressed in the basest way. Of course, there have also been increasing concerns about corruption within our electoral system.

The Bill seeks to allay the possibility of postal ballot fraud, but I also hope that it will go some way towards putting the dignity back into democracy. I hope that Members from all parties recognise that the Bill would introduce pragmatic, sensible legislation into the electoral legal canon. Parliamentarians should be at the forefront of electoral reform, helping to ensure that opportunities for malpractice and criminal behaviour are eradicated.

The Bill would implement a ban on the handling of complete, incomplete or blank postal ballot papers by persons seeking to benefit a candidate or a political party, including candidates, agents and their staff, along with party officers, members, activists and representatives of pressure groups associated with political parties. Furthermore, the Bill would apply to people or organisations campaigning for or against a political candidate at an election, or, indeed, to people or organisations campaigning for or against a particular outcome at a referendum.

The Bill would enforce a reasonable limit on the number of postal ballots that any individual can hand in on behalf of other voters at a polling station or to a returning officer on polling day. Any individual registered to vote at an election would be able to hand in no more than the prescribed number of postal ballots that were not their own. We envisage that regulations made under the enabling power in the Bill would set the maximum number of postal ballots that any individual can hand in on behalf of other voters at a polling station or to a returning officer.

Individuals could exercise their own right to vote or could hand in their own sealed postal ballot in addition to the others they are returning. That is an important element of the Bill, for it is not always possible to identify the aforementioned subterfuge whereby a party affiliate or campaigner is handling postal ballots and delivering them to polling stations or returning officers. It is rare that an individual could be identified as being part of a political group or as an activist, so it is necessary to apply a limit to the number of postal ballots delivered to polling stations or returning officers for absolutely everybody, without exception.

What of the penalties for those who seek to undermine the will of the electorate through fraudulent behaviour? It is imperative that we enforce stringent sanctions that provide a deterrent to anyone considering committing an electoral offence by deviating from the new measures on postal ballot handling. The Bill would introduce a new offence. Individuals who are banned from handling postal ballot papers that belong to someone else—specifically party affiliates or campaigners—and who do not meet the criteria for an exemption would face the following penalties: a prison sentence of up to two years; a fine; or a prison sentence and a fine following conviction or indictment. Alternatively, in the instance of a summary conviction, they would face up to six months’ imprisonment or a fine on summary conviction.

There are of course exceptions and extenuating circumstances. The Bill would include an exemption for those individuals who are political or campaign affiliates but who are acting on behalf of a family member or another voter for whom they are a carer. That is critical. Although the law must seek to impede fraud and malpractice in elections and referendums, it is equally important that no one should feel that they are unable to exercise their democratic right to vote.

We must ensure that regulations provide polling station staff with the means to examine the intentions and provenance of anyone purporting to hand in someone else’s postal ballot papers. The best way to do that is to enable polling station staff to provide the individual in question with a prescribed form that, through a series of basic questions, would allow those staff to determine whether that voter is permitted to hand in or handle another person’s postal ballot papers. Hopefully, the form would provide a certain structure to the process and instances of calumny during innocuous visits to the polling station would be rare. Guidance would be established to ensure that polling station staff were well equipped to deal with the new requirements placed on them by the Bill.

It is important to recognise that the measures in the Bill have been carefully considered. It is essential that polling station staff do not look askance at voters who enter polling stations and voting booths on polling day, but the Bill would enable greater scrutiny of possible electoral misdeeds. Abstention from voting has often been too high in the United Kingdom, but voter turnout at last year’s general election was the highest in 25 years. I am certain that we parliamentarians can further encourage political engagement from a sometimes “vote shy” public, while examining the ways and means to make elections and referendums as fair and free as possible. Indeed, I hope that the Bill will be part of a wider movement of electoral transparency, decorum in campaigning and public engagement with our democracy. Perhaps most crucial of all is the right for all people to engage in political campaigning without intimidation and the threat of violence.

The Bill would introduce basic changes that would go some way towards addressing perceptions of wrongdoing, with a view to securing a fairer electoral system. I hope that my parliamentary colleagues will consider it with the candour and thoughtfulness that I have come to expect from them. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.24 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak against the Bill and its contents. First, though, before I am misrepresented, let me be absolutely clear that electoral fraud is a serious crime and should be taken seriously. It is important that police forces throughout the country have the resources necessary to bring about prosecutions when such fraud takes place. Along with my Opposition colleagues, I of course condemn any actions that seek to undermine the integrity of our democratic process.

As well intentioned as the Bill may be, regulation aimed at party campaigners through criminal law is not the answer. Moreover, the arguments put forward by the hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore) overestimate the scale of the problem. The proposals in his Bill are an overreaction. Unfortunately, some
Conservative Members have talked down our democracy with scaremongering stories of voter fraud. Stories of widespread voter abuse have been parroted by Tory MPs, not least by the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), whom I made aware that I would refer to him. On more than one occasion, he has attested to having evidence of multiple voting by students, but he has been unable to produce the evidence when it was requested of him.

Such stories have been used by the Conservative party to justify the piloting of restrictive identification requirements at the local government elections in May. The requirements will disproportionately affect communities with large numbers of old and disabled people and people from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. Other regulations are being introduced for future metro mayor elections.

Voters across Bromley, Gosport, Swindon, Woking and Watford will be required to produce ID when they next go to cast their ballot. They will need a piece of photo ID, a piece of non-photo ID and their polling card—all that before being issued with a ballot paper. Those without the necessary ID will not be able to participate in the local elections. They will be denied their democratic entitlement.

One would think we were in the midst of an epidemic of widespread voter fraud, but nothing could be further from the truth. The Conservative party says that electoral fraud through voter impersonation doubled nationally between 2014 and 2016. Although the number of alleged cases of voter impersonation rose from a meagre 21 to a whopping 44, the total number of votes cast in those years rose from 29 million to 64 million in 2016.

The question is whether we need new laws to regulate how we and political parties campaign. I firmly believe that the answer is no. First, such matters are best handled by the Electoral Commission’s code of conduct for campaigners. The Electoral Commission is clear that campaigners should not be involved in the process of assisting other people to complete postal or proxy vote applications or handling postal ballot packs. The Labour party makes that very clear to our activists, and we have incorporated it into our existing code of conduct and disciplinary processes.

In a small number of instances, accessibility is improved by individual campaigners assisting people by returning their voting packs directly to the returning officer or to a polling station. That is particularly true for disabled and elderly voters, who are not provided with public assistance to complete absent votes and face low levels of access to polling stations. Indeed, according to Scope, at the 2010 general election, two thirds of polling stations had “one or more significant access barriers” to disabled voters. Leonard Cheshire Disability found that a quarter of the people with disabilities it surveyed found it difficult to vote in person at polling stations at the 2015 general election. My fear is that regulation would criminalise the helpful and prohibit assistance that is otherwise unavailable to those voters who need it.

Regulation of the sort suggested in the Bill would be difficult to enforce and breaches would be almost impossible to detect. It would put off honest campaigners without deterring the dishonest ones. That is not just my view, but a view shared by Alan Mabbutt, a current Conservative party board member, who said that regulations targeted at campaigners “would do little to help. If a person is prepared to ignore the law on fraud and undue influence they would ignore laws here.”

Timothy Straker QC, a barrister who acts for the Electoral Commission, questioned the need for a criminal offence. He said that regulation would be “unenforceable and would bring the law and the process into disrepute”.

The Electoral Commission has rightly raised the question of how we define “campaigner”. For instance, if I assist my neighbour in taking their postal vote to a polling station, am I suddenly subjected to the law that the hon. Member for Southport wishes to introduce? There is no accepted definition of “campaigner”. I understand why he wishes to codify that in his Bill, but there will always be exceptions and unanswered questions.

The Bill has many regulatory holes and too many unresolved questions. Although I do not intend to force a Division, I want my opposition and that of many of my colleagues to be formally recorded. The hon. Gentleman talked about new forms for polling staff. Like me, he has been a local authority councillor and will know that the people who man polling stations on polling day are of the highest quality and do not need a form to determine whether they understand when voter fraud is taking place. We are best leaving it to the Electoral Commission and the judgment of those staff who make those decisions on the day.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Damien Moore, Mr Simon Clarke, Vicky Ford, Eddie Hughes, Andrew Bowie, Giles Watling, Julíà Lopez and Lee Rowley present the Bill.

Damien Moore accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 15 June, and to be printed (Bill 166).
Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill
[Lords]

Second Reading

6.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I should begin by paying tribute to my noble Friend Lord Ahmad for piloting the Bill through the other place with such skill and finesse. The aim of the Bill is to grant Her Majesty’s Government full power over British sanctions policy after we leave the EU and, in a memorable phrase, to take back control.

This Government’s driving purpose is to strengthen Britain’s global role and widen the horizons of our foreign policy in order to advance the interests and promote the values of the British people, but if our diplomacy is to be effective, it cannot be solely declaratory: we must have the means to impose a price on those who would threaten to do us harm. In the last resort, that will sometimes mean the use of force—this Government will not resile from acting when necessary—but more often, we back our diplomacy through sanctions. Today, the UK enforces 36 sanctions regimes, targeted on countries such as North Korea, Syria and Russia and terrorist organisations including al-Qaeda and Daesh. In total, about 2,000 individuals and entities are listed for sanctions, varying from asset freezes and travel bans to trade restrictions and arms embargos. At this moment, assets worth £12.5 billion are frozen in the UK.

Our powers to impose those sanctions and measures against money laundering derive almost entirely from the European Communities Act 1972. I am delighted to say that Parliament will soon repeal that Act by means of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which is now before the other place. When that Act comes into force, it will freeze Britain’s adherence to the existing sanctions regimes, but if we do nothing, we will lose the ability to impose new sanctions or remove current ones. That is why the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill is necessary. It will give any British Government the power to impose, amend or lift an independent battery of UK sanctions, and update measures against money laundering and terrorist financing, thereby restoring our sovereignty over a vital tool of foreign policy.

The House will readily understand the freedom of action that all British Governments today and in the future will regain. If, for example, there is an international crisis and we judge that sanctions are the best response, we will no longer be compelled to wait for consensus among 28 members of the EU. The Bill will give us the freedom to decide on national sanctions as we see fit, bearing in mind that Britain possesses the fifth biggest economy in the world and the largest financial centre in Europe.

Hon. Members will know that sanctions are most effective when jointly enforced by many nations. Nothing in the Bill will stop us concerting our sanctions with any measures imposed by the EU, but if there is no agreement in the EU, as there often is not, Britain can act independently or alongside other allies. If the EU shares our position, we can act together. The outcome will be that Britain enjoys both freedom of manoeuvre and the option of working alongside our European friends. In the main, I hope that the latter will continue and that we can act in tandem, because the truth is that Britain and our European neighbours will always confront the same threats and defend the same values.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said, Britain’s unconditional and inmoveable commitment to the security and defence of Europe will not change one iota when we leave the EU, and this country has always played a leading role in devising EU sanctions—it is thanks to our national expertise in this field that the UK proposed more than half of all the individuals and entities currently listed for EU sanctions. The EU will have every reason to concert its sanctions policy with us in future, just as we will be happy in principle to work hand in glove with the EU. The Bill will place this British Government and our successors in the strongest possible position. We will be equipped with the power to impose sanctions independently, but without prejudice to our ability to co-ordinate with our European allies.

The Bill is also necessary for the UK to continue to play its full part in the struggle against money laundering and terrorist financing. Without the Bill, we should soon find ourselves in breach of international standards. I am proud to say that Britain was the first G20 country to introduce a public register of beneficial owners of companies, thanks to the Conservative-led Government. We are now going further by creating a public register of the beneficial owners of any non-UK entities that possess or buy property in this country, or that participate in UK Government procurement. No other state is compiling such a register, which will be the first of its kind in the world.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend to confirm this: when he says property, is that all property or just real property?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention—I was referring to real estate. As I am sure he knows, the proposal has the same intention as the tax on enveloped dwellings that was introduced by the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, which has proved, to the best of my knowledge, to be extremely lucrative for the Exchequer.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): Given the Secretary of State’s commitment to the EU’s action on money laundering, is he saying that the Government will implement the fifth EU anti-money laundering directive, which requires that we all have public registers of beneficial ownership by the end of 2019?

Boris Johnson: As the right hon. Lady will be aware, the UK is already out in front of the rest of the world in insisting on public registry of beneficial ownership, irrespective of the implementation of the fifth EU anti-money laundering directive. As I will explain to the House, we already ask the overseas territories to do far more than other jurisdictions that offer financial services advantages.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I would be most grateful if the Secretary of State would give way again.

Boris Johnson: Oh, go on.
Dame Margaret Hodge: I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State. The reason I asked the question is that the EU’s anti-money laundering directive would have an impact on the UK and Gibraltar. I am interested in whether the Foreign Secretary will implement the directive, given that implementation is required by 2019.

Boris Johnson: I do not know the exact stage of the directive at the moment. To the best of my knowledge, we are in the process of implementing it. It should creep in under the wire and will, I hope, have the beneficial effect that the right hon. Lady desires.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Boris Johnson: I will not, if the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

As sanctions have serious consequences for the individuals and entities that are singled out, they should be employed only in accordance with the rule of law, so it may be helpful to the House if I describe the scrupulous procedure laid out in the Bill.

Whenever the Government intend to impose a new sanctions regime, a statutory instrument will be laid before Parliament. When selecting targets, we will apply the legal threshold of “reasonable grounds to suspect”, which is the standard that we currently use for UN and EU sanctions. Both the British Supreme Court and the EU’s general court—the former court of first instance—have endorsed the use of that threshold in recent cases, and it is vital that the UK and our international partners continue to employ the equivalent threshold so that our sanctions policies and theirs can be co-ordinated.

The Bill contains safeguards allowing those listed for sanctions to challenge their designation and receive swift redress if it is warranted. Sanctions are not ends in themselves: they must not be maintained simply out of inertia or force of habit once the necessity for them dies away. The Bill will entitle any designated person to request an administrative reassessment by the Secretary of State, who will have a duty to consider any such request as soon as reasonably practicable. The Secretary of State can amend or revoke the designation in response to new information or a change in the situation. As a last resort, the designated person can apply to challenge the Government’s decision in the courts under the principles of judicial review, and the Bill provides for classified evidence to be shared with the court as appropriate.

Britain is obliged by international law to enforce any sanctions agreed by the UN Security Council. If a court in this country believes that such a designation is unlawful, the Secretary of State can use his or her best endeavours to remove a name from a UN sanctions list, bolstered by the fact that Britain has permanent membership of the Security Council. If a Secretary of State declines to seek a delisting at the UN, the relevant individual could challenge that decision before the courts. In addition, the Bill obliges the Government to conduct an annual review of every sanctions regime and place a report before Parliament. The Government are also required to review each individual designation under all regimes every three years.

The Bill allows the Government to grant licences to allow certain activities that would otherwise be prohibited—for instance, to permit any individuals subject to asset freezes to pay for essential needs such as food or medicine. The Bill will also give the Government the power and flexibility to issue general licences that could, for example, allow aid agencies to provide humanitarian supplies in a country subjected to sanctions.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Where assets have been frozen—for example, in the case of Libya and its support for the IRA—does the Secretary of State see any scope for a licence to allow that money to be used to help the victims of such outrageous crimes?

Boris Johnson: I completely concur with the objectives espoused by my hon. Friend. Many people would like to see some compensation flowing from a more prosperous Libya to the victims of IRA terrorism and, indeed, to other victims of terrorism. Given what we have done so far with Libya, it would be very difficult to unfreeze the assets; they are not our assets and it would be difficult for us to procure them. On the other hand, there is scope—working with the Libyan Government as Libya gets back on its feet, which is what we are currently working for—to set up a fund for the victims not just of IRA terrorism in this country, but of terror in Libya as well. That is the way forward: the UK and Libya working together to address that historical injustice. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that subject, on which there are strong feelings both in this House and in the other place.

We must never lose the ability to keep pace with the criminals and terrorists who strain every nerve and sinew to confound and evade our efforts. The Bill provides the Government with the power to make, amend or repeal secondary legislation to combat money laundering and terrorist financing. Behind all this lies our primary goal: to restore the independent power of a global Britain to defend our interests and to exert our rightful influence on the world stage, acting in concert with our European friends whenever possible, sure in the knowledge that we are a force for good. I commend this Bill to the House.

6.47 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): This is one of many Bills that we need because of our impending departure from the European Union. We agree that sanctions are a crucial lever in our foreign policy armoury. Indeed, their use and usefulness is demonstrated by the fact that we have 36 sanctions regimes on countries ranging from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, and covering terrorist organisations such as Daesh and al-Queda. We accept that the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 in the EU (Withdrawal) Bill means that the Government must replace it with domestic powers. However, we have a number of questions, criticisms and challenges for the Government about the way in which they are doing that in the Bill.

Money laundering through the City of London is now estimated at £100 billion a year, and the two clauses in the Bill devoted to the matter are wholly inadequate to tackle this massive problem, which is illegal in itself and also hides and enables other crimes, perverts justice, distorts the economy and is seriously undermining our reputation. International standards to prevent it are set out by the Financial Action Task Force and translated—currently via the EU—to national level. We agree that legislation is needed so that we can continue to honour our international obligations.
**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that if we tackled tax evasion and avoidance, we would not see such modest levels of overseas development? Countries around the world—in Africa and Asia—would be able to finance their own basic services. Those places do have the money, but companies are stealing it via evasion and avoidance.

**Helen Goodman:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Quite a lot of the money that is hidden is hidden by corrupt regimes, particularly in Africa.

A major criticism of the Bill as first drafted was of its Henry VIII clauses. Throughout, the Bill was giving Ministers the power to make regulations—in other words, to make law that cannot be amended by Parliament and is sometimes made without even any debate. In our consideration of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, Members across the House complained that the level of the Henry VIII powers was so excessive that the Government agreed to a sifting Committee in order to limit the concentration of the power of the Executive. Arguably, with no sunset clause, this Bill is even worse in this respect. Speaking in the other place, the well-named and noble Lord Judge described it as a “bonanza of regulations” and the “Regulation Bulk Buy” Bill. Their lordships defeated the Government twice in votes on this. I hope that the Government will not seek to undo those changes to the Bill. If so, we will oppose them.

It is surely obvious to everyone that sanctions regimes are effective only when they are co-ordinated internationally, as the Foreign Secretary acknowledged, and we need maximum support across the world and agreed implementation mechanisms to enforce them. However, he did not really answer some of the questions as to how that is going to be done post Brexit. Half our sanctions emanate from the EU. I am not saying that this is necessarily a matter for legislation, but surely the Government should have a plan for how we are going to be involved in EU decision making on sanctions regimes and the implementation of those regimes. Ukraine is a good example of where that is needed. What specific plans has the Foreign Secretary developed for a framework to provide for continued co-operation with the EU on foreign policy issues after we leave? What discussions have been held on that particular issue in the Brexit talks? What are the Government seeking to achieve in their negotiations with the EU on that matter? We were warned last week by the three spy chiefs that, without co-operation with our EU partners in intelligence sharing, policing and judicial matters, it would be difficult to enforce compliance on sanctions, which are vital for dealing with terrorism and proliferation.

Labour’s view is that the core principles of sanctions policy should be that sanctions are targeted to hit regimes rather than ordinary people; minimise the humanitarian impact on innocent civilians; and have clear objectives, including well-defined and realistic demands against which compliance can be judged, with a clear exit strategy. There should be effective arrangements for implementation and enforcement, especially in neighbouring countries, and sanctions should avoid unnecessary adverse impacts on UK economic and commercial interests. We will seek to amend the Bill to ensure that those principles are adhered to throughout.

One very big and obvious hole in the Bill is its failure to incorporate Magnitsky clauses, which the House has repeatedly supported and voted for. Sergei Magnitsky was a Russian lawyer who uncovered large-scale tax fraud in Russia. For his pains, he was imprisoned and tortured throughout a whole year, finally dying having been brutally beaten up while chained to a bed. We will be tabling a Magnitsky clause that would enable sanctions to be made in order to prevent or respond to gross human rights violations. Such provisions have been adopted in the United States and Canada, and they were also reflected in the Criminal Finances Act 2017. I cannot understand how or why the Foreign Secretary has missed this opportunity; perhaps he has been too busy designing bridges. Such a step is not just about Russia. We are now in the strange position that the United States has tougher sanctions than we do on Myanmar.

**Boris Johnson:** I hesitate to accuse the hon. Lady of failure to read the Bill, but clause 1(2) makes it absolutely clear that sanctions can be imposed to promote human rights. A fortiori, that obviously involves a Magnitsky clause to prevent the gross abuse of human rights. The measure that she seeks is in the Bill.

**Helen Goodman:** I am afraid that I do not think the Bill makes that clear. First, it does not include the phrase, “gross human rights abuses”, which the Foreign Secretary just used, and furthermore, it does not refer to public officials. This is a matter that we can debate upstairs in Committee, and I will be happy to do so with the Minister.

Another key area that the Government have failed to address properly is the position of refugees and victims of human trafficking. Last month, the House unanimously resolved:

“That…conflict resolution…and the protection of human rights should be at the heart of UK foreign policy and that effective action should be taken to alleviate the refugee crisis”.

There are now 66 million refugees—more than there have ever been and more than the population of the United Kingdom. The flow of desperate people across the Mediterranean and through Turkey is continuing. Yet the Bill gives no impression that Ministers have given any thought whatsoever to the plight of these people, who are seeking refuge from desperate and protracted conflicts around the world.

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas** (Sir Alan Duncan): May I draw the hon. Lady’s attention again to clause 1(2)? Paragraph (e) mentions exactly what she is talking about—promoting “the resolution of armed conflicts or the protection of civilians in conflict zones”.

Paragraphs (f), (g) and (h) refer exactly to the human rights abuses that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary mentioned in response to her earlier comments.

**Helen Goodman:** That is absolutely true, but if the Minister reads a little further into the Bill and looks at clauses 6 and 7 on aircraft and shipping, he will see that there are some problems at that point. Again, we can come back to this in Committee.

The Bill states that prohibitions can be applied to UK nationals and companies based in the United Kingdom but not against companies based or incorporated in the British overseas territories. Recent reports from UN monitors implicate territories such as the British Virgin Islands in the setting up of front companies that helped...
North Korea to evade the sanctions imposed on it. The problem of sanctions avoidance is very serious. Last week, I was told in answer to a written parliamentary question that the total cost of financial sanctions reported as having been breached last year was £170 million. This afternoon, I received a letter from the Treasury, which has looked at the numbers again and says that the number is £1.4 billion. We need to look at this in more detail in Committee.

I now turn to the anti-money laundering provisions—what one might call the McFafia section of the Bill. To set this in context, the Home Affairs Committee report of June 2016 found:

“Money laundering is undoubtedly a problem in the UK... It is disgraceful that at least a hundred billion pounds is being laundered through the UK every year. If the UK is to remain the centre of global finance, this must be addressed.”

It pointed out that

“money laundering takes many... forms... from complex financial vehicles and tax havens around the world through to property investments in London... and high value jewellery. It is astonishing that just 335 out of some 1.2 million property transactions... were deemed to be suspicious. This suggests to us that supervision of the property market is totally inadequate”.

At the moment, it is far too easy—

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Is the hon. Lady aware of the geographical targeting orders piloted by the USA that we were told about in Washington last week? Does she know that 30% of the orders piloted by the USA that we were told about in Panama, acted for 113,000 companies incorporated in the British Virgin Islands, which hosts 950,000 offshore companies. That is a country with a population of 30,000. This is public interest journalism at its best—fearless, determined and forensic. Had it not been for the excellent investigatory journalism, we would not have known that Britain’s high street banks processed $740 million from a vast money-laundering operation run by Russian criminals through anonymously owned firms, nor that Mukhtar Ablyazov, who fled Kazakhstan in 2009 after $10 billion went missing from the bank he chaired, had a Cayman Islands trust set up by law firm Appleby.

Significantly, HMRC has been able to use the information revealed in Panama and Paradise to open civil and criminal investigations into 66 people and pursue arrests for a £125 million fraud, tackle insider trading and place dozens of high net worth individuals under review.

Helen Goodman (Barking) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right that the situation is complex—we have one legal regime for the overseas territories and Crown dependencies—but I think that that would be beyond the scope of the Bill.

The all-party parliamentary group on responsible tax, led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), has been pursuing this agenda energetically for several years now, and across the House, Members want effective action.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that, when one of my constituents reported a fraudulent entry in the Companies House register, the response from Companies House was that it does not do the enforcement, but is just the registry? This fraud is a mockery of the whole registry system.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend has brought precisely the point to the House in highlighting that unfortunate episode.

Registers have been introduced in some of the British overseas territories, but they can be accessed by the authorities in London only when the authorities have a reason to be suspicious. The inadequacy of that approach was demonstrated by the publication of the Panama papers and the Paradise papers. According to the Guardian investigators, the law firm Mossack Fonseca, operating out of Panama, acted for 113,000 companies incorporated in the British Virgin Islands, which hosts 950,000 offshore companies. That is a country with a population of 30,000. This is public interest journalism at its best—fearless, determined and forensic. Had it not been for the excellent investigatory journalism, we would not have known that Britain’s high street banks processed $740 million from a vast money-laundering operation run by Russian criminals through anonymously owned firms, nor that Mukhtar Ablyazov, who fled Kazakhstan in 2009 after $10 billion went missing from the bank he chaired, had a Cayman Islands trust set up by law firm Appleby.

Significantly, HMRC has been able to use the information revealed in Panama and Paradise to open civil and criminal investigations into 66 people and pursue arrests for a £125 million fraud, tackle insider trading and place dozens of high net worth individuals under review. Imagine how much more effective it could be if transparency were the rule and not the exception.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes a good series of points about the nature of the British overseas territories and Crown dependencies.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is right that the situation is complex—we have one legal regime for the overseas territories and another for the Crown dependencies—but I think that that would be beyond the scope of the Bill.

Ministers know that this is a problem. Between 2013 and 2016, David Cameron’s Government issued increasingly strong statements and promises, culminating in the May 2016 global summit. There were three specific proposals: a transparent register of beneficial owners of all companies registered in the UK, similar registers in the British overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and a public register of foreign owners of UK property. However, the implementation has been halting, under-resourced, partial and confused. Currently we have at least 25 different regulatory bodies. It is true that we can now see on the Companies House register who the person is with significant control, but last year 400,000 companies failed to submit the information. Companies House has no due diligence procedure and employs only 20 people to supervise 4 million entries.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is right that the situation is complex—we have one legal regime for the overseas territories and another for the Crown dependencies—but I think that that would be beyond the scope of the Bill.

The all-party parliamentary group on responsible tax, led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), has been pursuing this agenda energetically for several years now, and across the House, Members want effective action.
Another scandal is the use of London property by oligarchs, corrupt officials and gangsters from across the globe. I am talking about people like Karime Macías, the Mexican wife of the former Veracruz Governor Duarte. He has been imprisoned and charged with corruption, money laundering and involvement in organised crime. His years in office saw a spike in disappearances and murders, while she claims to be a fugitive in London.

When I was young, if you drove through Chelsea at night, it was full of light because people actually lived there. Now, swathes of London are pitch black, as properties are bought simply as money safe. Meanwhile, in the outer boroughs, which the Foreign Secretary never visits—

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Lady may recollect, I was never out of the outer boroughs when I was Mayor of London, and the former Mayor of London visited Havana more often than he visited Havering.

Helen Goodman: I wish the Foreign Secretary was as energetic in his pursuit of the corrupt in this Bill as he is concerned to defend his own record on travelling around the London underground.

In the outer-London boroughs, new buildings are bought off plan and some never even have the cellophane unwrapped. Global Witness has found that 86,000 properties in this country are owned by companies in secrecy jurisdictions. The Cayman Islands representatives told me, when they came to see me in preparation for the Bill, that they were responsible for 11% of the property investment in Britain, pushing up prices so that they are unaffordable, and young people’s home ownership in this country is now at an all-time low.

The new register promised by the Government in 2015 has been put back by six years. There must be a suspicion that this secrecy continues because some senior Tories use it. Just one example will suffice. Lord Sassoon was revealed by the Paradise papers to have a family fortune worth hundreds of millions of dollars, yet he was a Treasury Minister and the man charged with presiding over the Financial Action Task Force—the very body tasked with setting the standards to combat money laundering.

We are going to pursue all these issues over the coming weeks. I cannot do better than quote the global summit communiqué, which said:

“Corruption is at the heart of so many of the world’s problems. It erodes public trust in government, undermines the rule of law, and may give rise to political and economic grievances that...fuel violent extremism. Tackling corruption is vital for sustaining economic stability and growth, maintaining security of societies, protecting human rights, reducing poverty, protecting the environment for future generations and addressing serious and organised crime...We need to face this challenge openly and frankly”.

7.8 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I want to start by making it clear that I think this is a very good Bill. It is clearly the right approach to take in these circumstances and a good administrative measure. It delivers sensible and orderly governance and addresses quite rightly the post-Brexit situation and the new framework for implementing sanctions. My purpose in this debate is to suggest two ways in which the Bill can be improved further.

First, I draw the Foreign Secretary’s attention to an area of the Bill that the Minister for Europe and the Americas understands extremely well. Sanctions regimes inevitably affect the peace-building work that humanitarian agencies do in some fragile and difficult places, and in particular key NGOs operating in sanctioned countries. I pay tribute to the remarkable work that is being done by British NGOs in some very difficult parts of the world; I am thinking, for instance, of Syria and Yemen.

Clare Short, the distinguished former International Development Secretary—she set up DFID—and I gave evidence to the Select Committee on the difficulties that can arise for the agencies on occasion. They may fall foul of terrorism measures, which adversely affect their life-saving work. There are difficulties in working in lawless areas, which inevitably involves negotiating with some extremely bad people. Under the regime that the Foreign Secretary is ushering in, the Bill will bring much greater clarity for donors who deliver via NGOs and for banks worried that they may fall foul of the regulations. It will help to reduce bank de-risking—I have heard of NGOs not being able to maintain access to their bank accounts or to transfer funds because of the regulations—when banks fear that they may breach sanctions by providing banking services. I hope the Bill will reduce banks’ concerns, assist transport and logistics companies in their work, help NGOs to access formal banking channels, and reduce or eliminate possibilities for remittancing, which, as Members on both sides of the House will know, involves a far bigger transfer of funds to the poor world than international aid.

The Geneva convention states that humanitarian aid be provided to those most in need, without discrimination. The Bill has the capacity to empower leading UK and experienced international charities to carry out our international obligations under such conventions yet more effectively. Building on that, we want to see a general licensing system for financial transactions for the provision of goods and services, which are essential to the delivery of critical aid, for individuals and entities that may be located in areas covered by sanctions.

My first point is that, while accepting that the Government have international obligations in respect of sanctions regimes that inevitably have an impact on the Government’s ability to deliver those commitments in full and on all occasions, the Bill nevertheless has the power to improve this area greatly. I hope the Minister for Europe and the Americas—as I have said, he has a very strong understanding of these matters from his time as an International Development Minister—will say a word or two about that tonight.

My second point is also about an area in which the Bill can be improved. This was mentioned by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who led for the Opposition. It builds on the important comments made recently by David Cameron, the former Prime Minister, about the Magnitsky rules and the Magnitsky amendment, and I hope that the Bill is susceptible to improvement in that respect.

In spite of our self-image as a country that lives by the rule of law, the reality is that officials from autocracies around the world who are guilty of appalling crimes come to London to live safely and comfortably without
much interference from us. There is now a mechanism to prevent this, which is used by the United States and other countries, called the Magnitsky Act. It is named after the Russian whistleblower Sergei Magnitsky, the appalling treatment of whom was described by the hon. Lady. The Magnitsky Act freezes the assets and bans the visas of human rights violators from around the world. The State Department recently published its Magnitsky list, which includes the son of Russia’s general prosecutor, a general from Myanmar implicated in ethnic cleansing, the ex-dictator of Gambia, a shady international fraudster from Israel and a retired Pakistani colonel suspected of organ trafficking. Alarmingly, every single person on that list is able to travel to the United Kingdom.

Last year, Parliament took an important step to combat this impunity by passing the Magnitsky amendment to the Criminal Finances Bill, under which human rights violators can now have their assets frozen by the Government. Unfortunately, the law is narrowly defined and does not match the standard of other Magnitsky laws around the world. For example, it does not address the issue of visas, and it places a huge burden on the Government in going to court to obtain an order to freeze assets, rather than giving my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary the power to do so by decree.

The Magnitsky amendment to this Bill—I very much hope it will be considered in Committee or, if not, on Report—would bring our legislation into conformity with Magnitsky Acts around the world. Any amendment would define precisely the types of human rights violators to be sanctioned, and most importantly, it would follow an example set by the United States and other countries by placing a requirement on the Government to report annually to Parliament on how effectively the sanctions regime is being used. In my judgment, we should not allow the Government to declare victory over human rights violators with the passage of a law that never gets implemented. I believe that such an amendment may well attract support from all right hon. and hon. Members.

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Mr Mitchell: It is early days, but I think the existing powers are being used rather less than my hon. Friend and I would wish, and I have read out a list of people who are sanctioned by other countries, but not sanctioned by the UK. That was my second point.

My final point relates to the much discussed issue of open registers and the overseas territories. The House will recall the actions of the coalition Government and Britain’s leadership at the G8 in tackling tax evasion and tax havens. I thought the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland was a touch too curmudgeonly in acknowledging the extent to which the coalition Government made real progress on those matters. The UK has introduced publicly accessible registers of people with significant control, abolished bearer or anonymous shares and introduced unexplained wealth orders, while the anti-bribery law was finally introduced by the coalition Government. Britain has a proud record of world leadership on this under a Conservative-led Government.

This is the fourth occasion on which I, along with my right hon. and hon. Friends—under the able, cross-party leadership of the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge)—have tried to coax the Government into visiting on the overseas territories the same level of openness and transparency as we have in this country. Let us be clear on the constitutional position, which the Government set out in 2012:

“As a matter of constitutional law the UK Parliament has unlimited power to legislate for the Territories.”

The overseas territories themselves recognise that they gain hugely from their relationship with the United Kingdom.

The overseas territories have been resistant to this argument for three reasons. The first—let us call it the Dutch Antilles argument—is that if they have open registers, all the hot money will head off to other less law-abiding jurisdictions. Leaving aside the issue of whether any decent person should wish to handle hot money obtained through corruption or worse, the fact is that the international consensus is to bear down on such havens, and their footprint is narrowing. Indeed, havens that embrace such transparency will secure a business advantage precisely because their legitimate business will no longer be tainted by fears of the reverse. There is an understanding of this point in at least some of the overseas territories, which, if I may put it this way, camp on the prayer of St Augustine: “O Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.”

The second argument, which we must address head-on, is that the overseas territories’ private registers are already available to lawmakers and regulators such as the Inland Revenue. The territories proudly say that they can turn around inquiries from HMRC within hours. This is commendable, but it completely misses the point. That fact is underlined by the recent release of information by journalists, which the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland mentioned. Registers must be open—to civil society, the media, journalists, non-governmental organisations—if all the relevant dots are to be joined up, as the release of the Paradise papers so clearly shows. With the best will in the world, the regulatory authorities are not in that business, and narrow questions from regulatory authorities simply do not suffice.

Finally, I come to the point made movingly by the Foreign Secretary that many, although not all, overseas territories suffered an existential calamity from the recent hurricanes. The whole House will share his concern. I am sure the whole House can assist by agreeing, in any amendment, a longer but definitive period of time in which this reform in the overseas territories should take place.

Around the world, the UK is looked to and respected for its leadership on international development. Helping the poorest in often far-flung places is written deep into this country’s DNA. It is who we are as a Parliament. The appalling but temporary crisis afflicting Oxfam will not change that. We have an obligation, not least to our own taxpayers, to champion transparency and openness, and to have zero tolerance towards corruption. The highly respected Africa Progress Panel has shown that in the Democratic Republic of the Congo more than £1.5 billion of stolen funds and taxes have disappeared. These are funds stolen from some of the poorest people on the
planet, who by contrast live in one of the richest mineral and resource-endowed countries in the world. As the World Bank has made clear, the money stolen from the people of Africa through unpaid taxes or concealment dwarfs all the foreign direct investment and international development money that flows into Africa each year. Much of that money ends up salted away in the tax havens I have described. We owe it to the poor of Africa, as well as to our own taxpayers, to take the action we can to bring about an end to this scandal.

I urge the Government, on this fourth occasion, to look very seriously at the amendment that will undoubtedly be tabled by the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) on Report, if not before. Four times we have been around this track. There is significant support on both sides of the House for that amendment. I urge those on the Treasury Bench to look very seriously at whether they can accommodate the House of Commons on this point.

7.21 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): This is another Bill that has been caused by Brexit. EU co-operation has been crucial to sanctions and anti-money laundering, and we have moved quite far along the road together as friends, neighbours and colleagues. A lot of concerns about the Bill have been voiced in relation to the justification of proportionality, and whether it takes us in the right direction to give us the opportunity to correct the flaws in our own systems.

Sanctions, as other hon. Members have said, are effective when we have co-operation, particularly as an EU block. That reflects the limitations of sanctions from the UN Security Council, because there is not always agreement among its permanent members. We need to find our place. Our place is not in the EU, as it was, but it is not entirely as other states are in the world. We need to find out where we are. Tom Keatinge from the Royal United Services Institute has said that we may have greater flexibility, but we will certainly have less influence. Ministers need to be reminded of that. I see that the Foreign Secretary has scuttled off without hearing me, which is kind of him. Without the active co-operation and engagement of Ministers with the EU, we will not be able to be the most effective at imposing sanctions.

We should not pour our own collective efforts over the edge. Much of that money ends up salted away in the tax havens I have described. We owe it to the poor of Africa, as well as to our own taxpayers, to take the action we can to bring about an end to this scandal.

I support the points on human rights made by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). Ministers did not quite recognise the point that paragraphs (e), (f), (g) and (h) in clause 1(2) are in the Bill because they were put there by a Labour Lord. She may have made that point, but I did not want to let it pass without having recognised it. The Government should not be taking credit for things they did not do and did not put in the Bill. Those paragraphs should be in the Bill. Anything that can enhance the importance of human rights in the Bill should be there.

The NGO sanctions and counter-terrorism working group, chaired by Bond and the Charity Finance Group, has asked for protection in law for humanitarian and peace-building work, as that is, to a degree, currently inhibited by the EU regulatory framework on sanctions. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) set out, aid operations in parts of the world that are extremely dangerous and under sanctions from the UN and the EU still have to have aid workers. They have to build up relationships on the ground. They may not be comfortable with them and they may be difficult, but aid would not happen without them.

Currently, there is not sufficient protection in the Bill. There is reference to general licences with a bit more focus on guidance. Clause 37(1) states that the Minister who makes the regulations must issue guidance, but clause 37(2) states only that guidance “may” include guidance about compliance enforcement and disregards. That is not concrete enough. The guidance should be more certain, so that people know the regime they are working under, know the risks involved in what they are about to do and know if there will be any comeback from the actions they take. I do not think that that is clear enough, and I would like to see improvements in this area of the Bill. More concrete assurances are required.

That concern is shared by the banks. The UK Finance briefing on the Bill says that there is a fear of misuse, but there has to be a way to get around that. It provides the example of banks avoiding any transactions whatever with Iran, due to the risk of being sanctioned by the US—it sanctions regime is far-reaching. That risk alone has a chilling effect on its transactions in that area, regardless of any actual certainty. Sanctions will have an impact on such countries for many years to come, even after sanctions have ended. Banks need to have the confidence that they can deal with a country consistently over a number of years without falling foul of sanctions that suddenly reappear. The people working in such countries need to interact with donors, banks and transport and logistics companies. They need comfort on that. They need to buy fuel. They need to buy mobile phones. They need to make payments to move about the country and to let aid flow. For example, it is not possible to move around Yemen because there are different forces imposing different visa regimes. Moving around the country may involve making payments that fall foul of sanctions.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Is the hon. Lady in effect agreeing with the Law Society of Scotland’s interpretation of the need in clause 1 for a list of all sanctions, including descriptions of any designated person and types of sanction imposed, and exemptions from such sanctions? Is that the thrust of the point she is making, because I agree with that?
Alison Thewliss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for agreeing with me. It is very rare and very nice, and I thank him for it. Yes, there has to be a good deal more clarity. I welcome the Law Society’s view, because that is not clear in the Bill. If people are working in that environment, they need certainty. For aid to flow and for banking transactions to flow, there has to be clarity.

UK Finance seeks further detail in clause 18 on extra-territorial application. It wants to know exactly what a UK element constitutes and what its reporting obligations might be under that regime, because it is not entirely clear.

Scrutiny and transparency are somewhat lacking. There is a lot of scope in the Bill for Ministers to create significant new criminal offences through secondary legislation, some of which would carry a sentence of 10 years in prison under clause 17(6). It is constitutionally unacceptable for that type of thing to be created by Ministers, and it is not just me saying that. The House of Lords Constitution Committee wants beefed-up parliamentary scrutiny, and the House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee states that the provisions “confer exceptionally wide powers which are capable of being applied to a very wide range of persons, with a very wide discretion being given to Ministers to determine the persons against whom sanctions measures may be applied.”

We should be concerned about that and seek corrections later in the process.

The Secretary of State, who has left his place, may not make decisions in haste, but we have to be concerned about the future. This is not a Bill for just now; but for many years to come, so the powers that we put in it are very important. The European Scrutiny Committee currently looks at EU sanctions that go through. We need to know what scrutiny process in this place will replace that, because it is important to ensure that things are being done properly and are above board.

At clause 21(4)(a) and (b) and clause 25(3)(a) and (b), a review process of three years from the laying of a sanction is mentioned. I would like clarity from the Government about why that is three years, because I understand that in the EU process it is only one. The Secretary of State said that a person who has been subject to a sanction has the ability to request from him that it is reviewed. Given that circumstances change and given the way of the world today, perhaps three years is a little too restrictive. We might want to push that down a bit further, or at least give scope for it to be varied, given the circumstances.

Clause 41—a Henry VIII clause, which has the power to authorise additional sanctions—is very like the other clause that I just mentioned, and again, the Lords Constitution Committee had concerns when it looked at it. The clause allows the amending of the definition of sanctions and puts a lot of powers into the hands of Ministers. What is the mechanism, the clause or the parliamentary check on that? Where is the means for Parliament and Committees of the House to have their say on the scrutiny of that? It is fundamentally important to have checks and balances in the system.

I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on responsible tax, as is the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), and I am pleased to see her amendment on beneficial ownership. I look forward to hearing her later on in the debate hopefully talking about that a wee bit more. There are a lot of issues about working with overseas territories and Crown dependencies. Much as I do not wish the House to legislate on Scottish matters, I do not want us to legislate for overseas territories or Crown dependencies without consent. That is very important. If we want to get buy-in and compliance, imposing things upon people may not necessarily be the best way to do it.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Lady has hit on a very important point. If changes are to be made in the Crown dependencies and overseas territories, it must be by persuasion, rather than imposition. Does she agree that so far, by using persuasion, significant changes have been made in transparency in those countries? That should perhaps be the thrust of future Government policy to ensure that these areas do not become places where money can be hidden and laundered.

Alison Thewliss: We have to be very careful. To an extent, we push people and give them a carrot, and in a sense, we have a stick. We have to weigh up in all of this where exactly they are on that continuum and with compliance. Will Ministers tell us what conversations they have had with the likes of Guernsey and Jersey? Do they have confirmation of a permissive extent clause? I am very keen to see open registers. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield laid out some points on that excellently. If the registers are there, they should be publicly available. We want to see transparency everywhere, but we also need to bear in mind that we have a long way to go on ensuring that everything that we do is absolutely correct and proper.

There are clearly issues and disputes among people about their interpretation of the proposals. Having read a submission from Jersey and Guernsey, I know that their account of affairs is quite different from other people’s. Perhaps we will have time in Committee to discuss this a wee bit more, take evidence and see in more detail exactly what needs to be done, how far people can be pushed, cajoled or brought along, or whether or not we need take this action and the extent to which it has a different force.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am intrigued by the hon. Lady’s contribution. We all want to move forward on the basis of consent, but I slightly disagree with her about how fast the overseas territories are moving. It has been five years since David Cameron first encouraged them to develop public registers of interest. We have to be very careful. To an extent, we push people and give them a carrot, and in a sense, we have a stick. We have to weigh up in all of this where exactly they are on that continuum and with compliance. Will Ministers tell us what conversations they have had with the likes of Guernsey and Jersey? Do they have confirmation of a permissive extent clause? I am very keen to see open registers. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield laid out some points on that excellently. If the registers are there, they should be publicly available. We want to see transparency everywhere, but we also need to bear in mind that we have a long way to go on ensuring that everything that we do is absolutely correct and proper.

Alison Thewliss: I agree. That is the point I was trying to make, fairly badly I suppose: how long do we leave it? Has it been five years with no sign of anything, or five years with some sign of something? We need more conversations to see exactly where things are, but I am keen to support the right hon. Lady’s amendment.

There is slightly more concern about overseas territories such as the British Virgin Islands and Bermuda. When we look at the extent of the Panama papers and the Paradise papers, we cannot fail to be deeply concerned
by the extent of nefarious transactions, out-and-out theft and money laundering, particularly when it involves, as other Members have said, the siphoning—the guzzling—of funds whose populations can least afford it. We should be deeply concerned about that, and there seems to be little indication that they will comply at all. Perhaps there is a different approach from the Crown dependencies and the overseas territories on how willing they are to comply with what has to be done to make things transparent and open.

Moving on to part 2 and clauses 43 and 44, on the progress towards beneficial owners of overseas entities. This is very encouraging, but again the thing with the Bill is that action is required. Action is required to check up on all these companies and registrations. Action is required on enforcement and prosecution, and enforcement action requires agencies, intelligence, people and boots on the ground to make sure that it is done. It is fine to have law, but if we do not have anybody to enforce it, there is absolutely no point at all.

Scottish limited partnerships are a particular example of where things are not being enforced. This was bequeathed to me by Roger Mullin, and I am very grateful. It is of where things are not being enforced. This was bequeathed to me by Roger Mullin, and I am very grateful. It is fine to have law, but if we do not have anybody to enforce it, there is absolutely no point at all.

Scottish limited partnerships are a particular example of where things are not being enforced. This was bequeathed to me by Roger Mullin, and I am very grateful. It is estimated by Richard Smith and David Leask, who have been working hard on this issue—hon. Members will have seen some of David’s reports in The Herald—that an estimated 20,000 to 28,000 SLPs are of concern. The Herald recently reported that a former president of Peru has been accused of taking £4 million of bribes that have been funnelled through a shell firm based in Scotland. These things should be checked up on and enforcement action should have been taken, but SLPs have become a cover for all manner of murky and dubious behaviour.

As Transparency International and others have said, the missing link in all this is Companies House, because it does not have the duty to refuse a company’s registration; it has to register the company. It does not check up on whether it is legitimate, or whether the people who are registering it actually exist, and it is less compliant than the agents who use it, so there is no benefit to someone going through an agent if they can go through Companies House and avoid all the scrutiny. We have an opportunity in the Bill to close that loophole, because for me, Companies House is ignoring its money laundering duty.

There are wider concerns about shell companies. I invite the Minister to look at New Zealand, which was in a similar situation. However, its regulations have seen a near eradication of its 5,000 shell companies, which were registered to only about a dozen addresses in New Zealand. Part of the solution was a requirement for a New Zealand-based director, which made a huge difference almost overnight.

Mr Sweeney: Another interesting example from the recent Labour Government in New Zealand is the idea that they could ban the overseas ownership of property. Given the huge inflationary pressure in the UK housing market, usually from the opaque overseas ownership of UK property, perhaps we ought to consider that measure in this country as well.

Alison Thewliss: Yes, that would be a very useful addition. The Secretary of State did not answer the questions on the fifth money laundering directive: how it will be transposed; how it will be scrutinised; if there is a transitional phase; what that transition will look like; how we will prevent any loopholes; and how we will make sure that criminals do not exploit that transition.

Sir Alan Duncan: Perhaps at this stage I can give the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) the answer they are seeking on the fifth money laundering directive. It will be published in the summer of 2018 and member states will have 18 months to implement it. That will be after we leave the EU, so whether we or Gibraltar are legally required to transpose will depend on the terms of the implementation period, which of course are under negotiation.

Alison Thewliss: That sounds like a vague, “I don’t know” kind of answer.

Helen Goodman: Perhaps the hon. Lady would like to ask the Minister whether the powers he is taking in chapter 3—temporary powers in relation to EU sanctions lists—will not give him the power to enforce the fifth money laundering directive.

Alison Thewliss: That is a very good question. I do not know whether the Minister wants to take this opportunity to answer it—perhaps not. He has heard the question, so I need not repeat it.

Finally, I want to refer to the Scottish Government, because aspects of the Bill reflect some of the powers that lie within Scotland. The Court of Session is referred to in clause 33(2) and clause 34(2). What consultation has there been with the legal profession in Scotland and with the Scottish Government on that? On clause 47—“Regulations: general”—the power to change devolved legislation under the negative procedure is really not cool. It is not just I who object to this; the Library briefing states that this will “enable ministers to make supplemental, incidental, consequential, transitional or saving provisions repealing or otherwise amending existing legislation, including devolved legislation.”

Lord Judge referred to this clause as “monstrous”. Has the Scottish Government been consulted on this provision? What has the Minister got to say about this? This power grab, hidden on page 35 of the Bill, is something that I will seek to amend in Committee.

I support any moves to improve the scope of the Bill, and I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate.

7.42 pm

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): The Bill constitutes one piece of a patchwork of laws that are currently going through Parliament to create a post-Brexit framework of legislation, but it is potentially much more than just an enabler for the UK to implement sanctions post Brexit. Thinking about the Bill, it became clear to me how many scenarios it will actually cover, from sanctions used as an alternative to military or technological warfare to sanctions used to express the protection of national sovereignty or to counter financial corruption or human rights abuses, and in each case at state or individual level.

In short, I think that this is a good piece of legislation that will address the mechanical issues that we need to implement. As the Foreign Secretary has said, it recognises that the majority of sanctions implemented by the UK are derived from UN Security Council resolutions or
EU multilateral agreements. In practice, our EU and domestically derived powers to implement multilateral sanctions and any domestically generated ones will be limited by redundant or inadequate UK legislation. Therefore, mechanically, the Bill does the job.

I have seen the Lords amendments to the Bill. As is so often the case, the other place has done a thorough job of tightening up these inherently intrusive provisions to provide more focus and to take on board human rights considerations and reporting requirements. There was also a significant narrowing of the Henry VIII powers to create new sanctions, which is generally to be welcomed.

However, there is of course much more to consider than just whether we can practically implement sanctions. There are also the policy questions of what types of sanctions we want to issue; to what extent we wish to continue following the sanctions regimes of various national groupings, or whether we increasingly want to assert our own new policy post Brexit; and how our view ties in with our wider policy objectives on the trade and security fronts going into our Brexit negotiations.

In that context, I recognise and strongly support how the Prime Minister spoke out recently in Munich, and before that in her Mansion House speech and on her visit to Estonia, against Russia meddling in elections and planting false stories in the media to “weaponise information”, and also against its aggression towards eastern Europe, which is threatening the international order. However, I suggest that this admirable and strong rhetoric needs to be backed up with more specific proposals showing how and with whom we intend to use sanctions in the post-Brexit world. I was somewhat surprised that more space was not given to that policy issue in the Foreign Secretary’s speech this evening. Yes, of course trade policy will be vital post Brexit, but so will our ability to protect our trade interests and our wider democratic values.

More to the point, if we do not stand up, engage on this issue and lead in the way that many countries expect us to, our authority and influence could quickly disappear. The UK was a party to the Budapest memorandum, by which Ukraine renounced its nuclear weapons in return for what it thought would be peace with Russia. But when it came to Europe taking ownership following the betrayal by Russia and its occupation of Crimea and east Ukraine, it was France and Germany, rather than the UK, that led on sanctions.

Is that a portent of post-Brexit Europe, with reducing UK influence? If we do not lead, will we simply fade away to relative international insignificance, in the same way that a couple of months ago the UK lost its seat on the International Court of Justice for the first time since its foundation in 1946? I repeat that we need leadership on this issue as to where we want to place ourselves as a significant narrowing of the Henry VIII powers to create new sanctions, which is generally to be welcomed.

The key emerging issue on our future trade with the EU is that of regulatory alignment—whether we have it at all and, if so, whether it should be implemented by our choice or by tying ourselves to future changes through membership of the European economic area, for instance. The debate over alignment also holds for sanctions, but with a key difference. I believe: barring the extreme positions on the far left and the UKIP-style non-interventionist right, most of us would agree that close co-operation with the EU and the US will remain vital, and perhaps even more so now that we are possibly to lose our seat at the EU table and lose the leading role that the Foreign Secretary referred to in his speech today. That seems to have been confirmed by the Prime Minister in Munich last Friday, when she said that the UK will be leaving the EU’s common foreign and security policy.

Finding a new policy is therefore vital. It is no coincidence that Russia is delighted with the idea of Brexit, not least because of the potential weakening effect on the western alliance. It must be a key objective that we minimise that effect. We can see the importance of blocs in how Russia and China have been attempting to undermine UN sanctions on North Korea. Without a concerted US and EU insistence, what chance would we, the UK, have had of stopping recent Russian and Chinese abuse by acting alone? The answer, I fear, is very little, despite having the fifth biggest economy in the world.

In that regard, the more experts in this area that one listens to, the more one comes away with the understanding that the most effective sanctions regimes are those put in place by multiple countries. UK unilateral sanctions placed on Russia following its murder of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006 may have been right in principle, but they were seen to have little impact in practice. On the other hand, the EU, as the largest trading bloc in the world, can pack a heavy punch when it implements sanctions, as the figures show it is increasingly being prepared to do.

Alignment is therefore in our interests, but we need to ask what form it should take. Should we align like the neutral Swiss or Norway, and not have a seat at the table or determine policy but just join in with the others? Personally, I would see that as a failure of our long-held responsibility to engage and help lead the free international community.

My view is that, for sanctions, we should negotiate a position with the EU whereby we keep a decision-making and voting seat at the table. Whether that is done via some form of membership of the EU’s Political and Security Committee or through a new body is what we should now be considering. In Munich last week Mr Barnier called for an “ambitious partnership” that is “broad... beneficial and balanced”. I think that we should take him up on that invitation.

From a UK business perspective, there could be severe dangers associated with unilateral action. It could result in British companies being much more easily impacted by counter-sanctions imposed by the targeted regime, and it could have the additional regulatory headache involved in multiple export licence systems.

Finally on sanctions, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), I turn to the financial crooks, drug and people-smuggling barons and human rights abusers who are laundering more than £100 billion through the UK every year. We do not want that money here, and hopefully the asset freezing provisions of the new Criminal Finances Act 2017, including its Magnitsky human rights abuse amendment, will help, although some action from the Government would now be welcome.

However, it is not just about the money. We do not want these people or their families here, enjoying the rule of law and standards that they so blatantly disregard.
in their own countries. I should like to see a new visa-based regime and a list system. As every Russian opponent of the Putin regime will tell us, it is exposure and publicity that such people fear the most. At a time when the United States has just issued a further list of people whom it is only considering adding to its public Magnitsky list, I would appreciate an explanation of why Ministers continue to keep the banned list private here in the United Kingdom.

On the subject of anti-money laundering, let me say that it would be very helpful if the Government produced their long-awaited anti-corruption strategy. Many anti-corruption themes need to be pulled together and acted on. Let me issue a plea for moderation, common sense and risk assessment to be given more consideration in that context. That plea comes from the thousands of people who are ever more frustrated to hear that £100 billion of black money is being laundered in the UK while they have been banned from or delayed in opening simple bank accounts for some petty, spurious or jobsworth reason.

7.51 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): The Bill commands general support on both sides of the House, and, like the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly), who made an excellent speech, I welcome it. As currently drafted, however, it fails to include one vital measure that would at a stroke transform Britain’s contribution to the fight against money laundering, tax avoidance and evasion, corruption and financial crime. That measure has been debated many times in both Houses, and is strongly supported by parliamentarians in all parties and by the all-party parliamentary group on responsible tax.

We simply want to ensure that British overseas territories, many of which constitute the leading tax havens in the world, have registers of beneficial ownership that are public and open for anyone to interrogate: businesses, individuals, the press or civil society. I for one have had enough of the endless rhetoric proclaiming that Britain is leading the global fight against corruption and money laundering. The reality has to start to match that rhetoric, because at present it does not. By failing to insist that our overseas territories have public registers of beneficial ownership, we are complicit in facilitating the very corruption that we claim to want to eradicate.

Our overseas territories play a central role in the scourge that is corruption, tax evasion and money laundering. Of the 200,000 companies exposed in the Panama papers, more than half were registered in the British Virgin Islands, a UK overseas territory. More than half the offices of the law firm Appleby that were exposed in the Paradise papers are located in UK-controlled tax havens, and 90% of the world’s top 200 global companies have a presence in a UK tax haven. A World Bank review of corruption cases over a 30-year period found that our tiny overseas territories came second only to the vast United States of America among jurisdictions that provide anonymous shell entities for those involved in international corruption.

We all know that the effect of this financial crime is immense, and that the impact on the poorest in the world is particularly pernicious. We in the UK lose money that we desperately need for our schools and hospitals, but developing countries are even more adversely affected. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development has estimated that developing countries lose at least $100 billion a year as a result of tax havens, and the OECD has estimated that they are costing those countries up to three times as much as the total global aid budget. What happens in our tax havens really matters. Persistent collusion by the UK in enabling them to endure, because of the Government’s failure to clamp down on the secrecy that pervades our British tax havens, is inexcusable.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful speech. Does she agree that whatever is in the Bill, it will lack any credibility if we point the finger at secrecy in other countries but do nothing about the secrecy in the overseas territories and Crown dependencies?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I strongly concur. Interestingly enough, David Cameron recognised that in 2013 when he told the overseas territories to rip aside the “cloak of secrecy” by establishing public registers of beneficial ownership. He wrote to them in 2014 saying that public registers were “vital to meeting the urgent challenges of illicit finance and tax evasion.”

In September 2015, he accused them of “frankly…not moving anywhere near fast enough.” He said that “if we want to break the business model of stealing money and hiding it in places where it can’t be seen: transparency is the answer.”

When he launched the UK’s public register, he argued that “it’s better for us all to have an open system which everyone has access to, because the more eyes that look at this information the more accurate it will be.”

I agree with all those sentiments and arguments. All that we are asking of the present Government is that they stand by the promises made by their colleagues, their right hon. and hon. Friends, in a Conservative-led Government nearly five years ago. I also agree with the current Prime Minister, who said: “If you’re a tax-dodger, we’re coming after you. If you’re an accountant, a financial adviser or a middleman who helps people to avoid what they owe to society, we’re coming after you”.

However, our tax havens are “middlemen”. It is time that the Prime Minister and her Government turned their rhetoric into practical action, and put an end to the nefarious activities that take place in so many of our jurisdictions.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Many of our tax havens, and some of our Crown dependencies, were put on the EU watch list. They had to demonstrate that they were making improvements. I understand that one of the ways in which they could get on to the watch list was for the UK Government to underwrite that progress by indicating that they would support it, which would enable them to avoid being put on the blacklist. Is it not imperative for us to enforce the commitment that we made to the European Union in preventing them from being put on the blacklist by ensuring that they implement what they promised?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I entirely agree. Indeed, if we leave the EU without having implemented reforms that would have an impact on the overseas territories, the EU will blacklist them.
I know that there are many principled Conservative Members—including the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell)—who care passionately about transparency, and have championed the cause from both the Back Benches and the Front Bench for many years. I urge them all to make clear to their Front-Bench colleagues that they will support a cross-party amendment setting a clear and reasonable timeframe within which the overseas territories would be required to prepare and launch public registers of beneficial ownership. I hope that the Government will listen to the advice of leading Back Benchers on their own side. Those of us who are involved in campaigning for transparency are not seeking short-term political advantage. What we want is an important, sustainable change that will have a lasting impact on the process of stamping out financial skulduggery, and a considerable impact not just on the United Kingdom’s public finances but on those of the poorest nations in the world.

We can never build a global Britain on dirty money. We will not create a strong economy on the back of being the jurisdiction of choice for every kleptocrat and crook in the world. Our British overseas territories will not prosper over time on the basis of being safe havens for illicit wealth. Transparency is an essential tool in the battle against all financial crimes. Exchanging information behind closed doors, which the Government claim is sufficient, particularly disadvantages the very same countries that suffer the most from financial crime and money laundering, because they have the weakest regulatory agencies in operation.

Relying on regulatory bodies is also very much second best. Even our under-resourced bodies such as Companies House are at best reactive in their work on uncovering financial crimes; there is very little evidence that they are undertaking proactive investigations. Indeed, the constant flow of scandals is strong evidence that the system based on the private automatic exchange of information is not working.

Let us consider the case highlighted recently by Global Witness of the $75 million paid by Glencore to Dan Gertler, a controversial businessman accused of bribing senior officials in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to advance mining interests. The money was originally due to be paid to Congo’s state mining company, but the ultimate owner was Mr Bastos.

Today’s Guardian contains disturbing revelations that North Korea broke international sanctions aimed at inhibiting the development of weapons by using a network of companies based in our tax havens to acquire millions of dollars-worth of fertiliser, coal and other commodities—our tax havens, undermining our national security and that of other western nations. Secrecy enables wrongdoing.

Ironically, the British Government have accepted that argument, because we are ourselves publishing our national register of beneficial ownership. The standard that we accept for ourselves should be the standard we expect for our overseas territories. To pretend, as the Government do, that the overseas territories are making good progress is nonsense. It was 2013 when David Cameron first demanded public registers; nearly five years later, we are still waiting for a number of the jurisdictions, including Anguilla and the Turks and Caicos Islands, to set up a central register.

Let me take this opportunity to debunk some of the myths that were prayed in aid when this matter was debated in the House of Lords. Raising the spectre of identity theft and personal security risks is wide of the mark. Public registers can have tightly defined case-by-case exemption policies to protect individuals who are genuinely at risk. Ministers claim that no other countries are adopting public registers. Again, that is not true: the EU is currently implementing the fifth anti-money laundering directive requiring all EU members to implement public registers by 2019, including Gibraltar, and we should be implementing that.

Arguing, as Ministers do, that we should not act until others have acted is a wretched excuse. We have been bold in leading the movement to stamp out corruption; we should pursue that course and be proud of it. As the number of tax havens decreases and the noose tightens around the remaining tax havens, our action will make action elsewhere in the world inevitable.

I welcome today’s statement from the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union that the UK wants to lead a global race to the top in rights and standards. There is no better way of leading that race to the top than by insisting that our overseas territories adopt public registers of beneficial ownership.

Public registers will not undermine legitimate businesses or individuals who want to continue to take advantage of low-tax regimes. They will expose those who seek to hide their money because they have received it corruptly, or who unlawfully evade tax, all too often at the expense of poor people and poor countries.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): On public registers, is it not also the case that firms that are more transparent are often more successful than those that are not? We see that in the examples of Santander, SSE and many others.

Dame Margaret Hodge: My hon. Friend on the Front Bench is completely right.

Finally, while we were all horrified by the destruction wrought by the hurricanes last year, those disasters should never, ever be used as an excuse for allowing kleptocrats, villains and tax evaders to prosper. In a White Paper on the overseas territories published in 2012, the Government stated:

“As a matter of constitutional law the UK Parliament has unlimited power to legislate for the Territories.”

I am urging tonight that the Government use their powers to insist that our tax havens—our overseas territories—put in place public registers in a defined timescale. That is a reasonable demand. Stopping it would create a grim stain on Britain’s reputation as we move to establish credibility in a post-Brexit world.

8.5 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I agree with what the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and my right hon. Friend the
made by the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). My right hon. Friend mentioned a change of emphasis. I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee. I understand from speaking to some of the United States authorities that there has clearly been a change of emphasis. We are getting quite a clear picture from the United States that it is not intending to go all the way with public registers of beneficial ownership, and certainly not as far as we would like to go. Therefore, we need to be clear about where we want to show leadership, but, at the same time, we have a duty to our overseas territories to ensure that, if we limit their economies in some way, we think about other measures that can support them in the short run.

**Nick Herbert:** I agree with my hon. Friend that it is necessary for us to show leadership, and I will say more about the support that we will need to give to the overseas territories in that respect.

A number of arguments have been advanced as to why it is not a good idea to require the overseas territories to introduce public registers. The first is that others will take advantage, and that criminal activity will simply relocate if we say that it can no longer take place in the overseas territories without visibility.

That argument is completely without moral credibility. It is also an admission that such activity is taking place in those areas. To say that we should not act because there might be an economic effect as a result of a reduction in criminal activity would be to argue that the Government should never take action against crime. We have to look at what steps might be necessary to compensate for and mitigate those effects, and to support the overseas territories, to whom we have an obligation in many ways. Simply to say that we will not insist on these changes because their economies would be damaged by the ensuing reduction in criminal activity would be akin to arguing that there would be no point in the police arresting a major drugs dealer in the UK because another drugs dealer might sell drugs in his place.

That argument cannot be sustained. If we believe that a wrong is being done to developed and developing countries—to argue that there would be no point in the police arresting a major drugs dealer in the UK because another drugs dealer might sell drugs in his place is an admission that such activity is taking place overseas territories without visibility.

That argument cannot be sustained. If we believe that a wrong is being done to developed and developing countries—as it is—by the absence of transparency enabling tax evasion and worse, it is our responsibility to tackle that wrong by any means we can. If we simply stand back and wait for change to happen, we cannot expect it to do so.

The second argument that is put forward is that the measures are unnecessary because allowing law enforcement agencies specific access to information on the beneficial ownership of companies is better. It might be the case that law enforcement agencies require a particular level of information, and they can get it through the introduction of central registers, which is a welcome initiative, but if people are seriously arguing that transparency is unnecessary for law enforcement, why did we introduce transparency in the UK? It is self-evident and intuitively obvious that transparency is an aid to law enforcement, because law enforcement agencies cannot be expected always to go after criminals. Criminal activity has to be exposed, and publication is a way of exposing and preventing it. It is telling that a lot of this activity has surfaced only because of leaks. We cannot rely on the law enforcement agencies alone, even with the assistance of central registers and the exchange of information, to deal with all these issues. Also, they cannot deal with tax evasion issues
that might be lawful but morally illegitimate. If it was right for the UK to do this, it is right for others to do it, especially our overseas territories.

That leads me to the third argument, which is an important and difficult one. To what extent should the UK insist that the overseas territories do anything? Would we be behaving in a neo-colonialist manner if we did so? This argument has surfaced more recently in relation to the decision by the legislature in Bermuda to reverse a decision of the Supreme Court relating to same-sex marriage. The UK Government made the difficult decision that it was not proper for them to intervene and that this was a matter for the Bermudian authorities. However, we took action in previous years when we reversed the colonial laws that we had bequeathed to the overseas territories in relation to the criminalisation of homosexuality. The very fact of the relationship between us and the overseas territories—and the very fact that we can change the law there by orders in the Privy Council—reveals a relationship that requires us to hold to certain standards.

I accept that there could be unusual circumstances in which the UK Parliament would seek to intervene, but when it comes to global law enforcement, the harm that is being done is so general that it surely justifies action. There is a danger that, if the Government are seen to be stepping back in relation to human rights issues and to corruption, far from winning praise for allowing the devolution of power and the expression of local democratic decision making in the overseas territories, we will actually be harming ourselves and our international reputation for not upholding our obligations to the highest standards. Therefore, on balance, the argument is made not only that we have the power to intervene but that we have a duty to do so if the harm that is being done is otherwise so great.

Let us be clear that the tide is now turning in the direction of increasing transparency. As we have heard from the official Opposition, the EU is adopting measures to ensure that that takes place, and it is significant that the developing countries—those that are most harmed by the absence of transparency—are often the most supportive of these measures. Countries such as Kenya, Nigeria and Afghanistan are committed to introducing public registers of beneficial ownership. Are we really saying that our own overseas territories will not be required to do so when developing countries such as those are committed to taking that action?

The uncomfortable truth is that some of our overseas territories are the worst culprits when it comes to tax havens. Everyone knows that; the papers that have been published reveal it, and the time has come to deal with it. I agree with the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) that the time has come to insist that our overseas territories deal with this issue because frankly we will not make progress unless we press them. That is why, if a sensible amendment is tabled to the Bill to set a reasonable timetable for the overseas territories to produce registers of beneficial ownership—an amendment that has cross-party support, that includes commitments to ensure redress for any economic harm and that is respectful of the great economic damage done by the terrible hurricanes to some of our overseas territories—I will support it. I hope that such an amendment will command support on both sides of the House. This is, after all, the policy set by a Conservative Prime Minister and this Conservative Government, and it is the right policy.

Tax havens harm the world’s poorest most of all. Tax havens harm developing countries, and they harm us. They harm us economically, but they also harm our reputation. We live in an age of accountability and transparency. We must continue to lead this argument and not be behind it, which is why I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench to take very serious note of what is being said in the House this evening and to act.

8.20 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), who made a powerful speech to which I hope his Front-Bench colleagues were listening. It is hugely encouraging to hear so many Conservative voices speak out in favour of more transparency than is already being implemented. I hope it is a sign that this House has a centre of gravity for encouraging further action, of which the Government need to take note.

This Bill is sadly necessary if we are to leave the European Union. The very existence of this Bill underlines the negative impact of Brexit. Our international influence is diminished by leaving the European Union. Of course, sanctions and action against financial crime and money laundering are much stronger when co-ordinated internationally, and the European Union has been a successful mechanism for doing just that.

The existing sanctions and anti-money laundering rules are important, because fighting corruption is an important part of protecting our democracy. When I was a Business Minister, I was charged with implementing parts of the accounting directive through secondary legislation and with championing extractive industries transparency through the extractive industries transparency initiative. One of the issues I was always keen to explain is the link between financial crime, which can often be seemingly victimless—we are talking about numbers on a spreadsheet or on pieces of paper—and its very real and significant impact on people’s lives. The extractive industries transparency initiative is about fighting the corruption that we know happens in some developing countries, where vast mineral wealth is siphoned off into the pockets of dictators rather than funding essential public services.

It is important that we recognise that our country is not immune to such practices. Given particularly that London is such a major financial centre, we perhaps have a greater responsibility than other countries to ensure that tough laws are properly enforced to crack down on corruption. Of course, UK tax havens are another area to which that responsibility extends. I totally agree with the points made about the effect on our international reputation when we do not make sure that happens.

On the sanctions part of the Bill, I welcome the UK’s appetite to align with the EU’s sanctions policy in future, although I note that we will not enjoy the influence we currently have on what that sanctions policy should be. It is crucial that we do not diverge from that policy, because we do not want to risk being seen as a haven for corrupt individuals and corrupt money.
As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said, there are opportunities in the Bill to provide greater clarity for NGOs that are doing vital work to expose corruption in countries where there may be regime changes that are subject to sanctions but where, none the less, those NGOs need to purchase fuel, supplies and food in country. Clause 15 makes sure there are more powers in primary legislation to provide exemptions so that there is legal clarity that what those NGOs are doing is proper and in order, which is important. Some NGOs, and others in the sector, have suggested that there could be improvements in the detail, which can no doubt be discussed in Committee and on Report.

More generally on sanctions, despite the amendments made in the other place, the Bill still hands over too many powers to the Government, and those powers are too widely drawn. Clause 12 is a case in point, as it defines sanctions not in terms of named individuals but gives Ministers the power to describe groups of people. The potential for unfairly catching individuals in such descriptions is large, and we still need to consider that point. I urge the Government not to look to overturn amendments made in the other place or to roll back the positive changes that have already been made to this Bill.

Various right hon. and hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, have raised the idea of a Magnitsky amendment. It is important that the UK takes a leadership role on human rights issues, and sanctions responding to human rights violations are therefore important. That means a crackdown on money and on visas, and it should also include a public list of those who are banned or for whom a ban is potentially being considered. I will look with great interest at any amendments tabled on that basis, and my party and I are very much minded to lend support to such amendments.

On the anti-money laundering aspects of the Bill, one part of the UK economy where there is real cause for concern is our property market. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) talked about her experiences when the Public Accounts Committee visited the United States last week. The United States is already ahead of us, with mechanisms to define areas where property transactions and property ownership can be further investigated. The statistics are shocking. As many as three in 10 properties that are investigated have suspicious ownership. The London property market is hugely vulnerable to such intervention. Properties are bought to try to clean dirty money.

Excellent research by Transparency International UK has identified £4.2 billion-worth of property in London that has been bought with suspicious wealth, most of it based in secretive jurisdictions. In praising Transparency International, I should declare a degree of interest. Transparency International has excellent research, and my husband happens to be its director of policy.

The anti-corruption summit in 2016 committed to introducing legislation so that overseas companies that own UK property would have to declare their beneficial owners. We were promised that legislation by April 2018—in two months’ time—that is clearly no longer happening. It has been delayed on more than one occasion, and now it looks like we will not receive even a draft Bill until the summer.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): With the UK in a housing crisis, does the hon. Lady agree that the Bill could speed up the property register and help tackle that important issue?

Jo Swinson: I absolutely agree. There is no need for any further procrastination. Officials clearly ought to have been looking at this issue since the promise was made at the anti-corruption summit 2016, and it was expected that something would be ready in time for this year. Even if a draft Bill is being considered for the summer—I recognise that parliamentary time is sometimes a constraint on the Government—there would be real support for the bringing forward of some amendments to this Bill based on what may already be partially drafted legislation, because money laundering is important when it comes to property and understanding who owns it. This situation is just another worrying signal from this Administration about the priority they give to combating corruption, because promises made in 2016 are being downgraded and delayed.

Others have pointed out the missed opportunity in this Bill in respect of the overseas territories and Crown dependencies. Back in 2015 and the latter part of 2014, I was the Minister who brought forward changes to the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill—now the Act—to introduce a public register of beneficial ownership of UK companies, and I am proud to have done so. Persons of significant control are now registered at Companies House, and people can now log on and see exactly what is there. I agree that there is a need for additional resources for enforcement to will the means, but that was an important step forward, and I am proud to have been part of a Government who took a leadership role.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), who was Business Secretary at the time, and to the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, because he was absolutely committed to fighting corruption and to playing a global leadership role through the G7 summit and beyond. He repeatedly made it clear that overseas territories should also publish registers. In fact, between 2013 and 2016, the Government sent letters to the overseas territories on several occasions encouraging action, and it is deeply concerning that the appetite has significantly diminished under the current Administration. It is almost as if the Government are now relaxed about the murkiness of financial transactions of the like that we saw revealed in the Paradise and Panama papers and about our overseas territories being used in the UK’s name to hide complex structures under which corruption can flourish. Progress has ground to a halt. If the Government disagree and think that they are as committed to tackling corruption as ever, what have they been doing since 2016? Where are the letters and notes from meetings where they have been encouraging the overseas territories to publish their beneficial ownership registers? I stand ready to be corrected if the Minister can provide that information, because the House would very much like to see it.

The right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) mentioned Gibraltar and the fifth anti-money laundering directive when the Foreign Secretary was in his place making his statement, suggesting that maybe we would be implementing it, because the UK is already going beyond what is required, but that was not entirely clear. We then heard a response...
that was slightly more depressing, if a little clearer, from the Minister for Europe and the Americas later in the debate, suggesting that we perhaps would not need to implement the directive because we may have left the EU by the final deadline for implementation. He knows as well as I that there is no reason to be a last-minute merchant about such things. There is nothing to stop us implementing the directive before the final deadline, so it is absolutely in the gift of the Government to do so. If they are choosing not to, that is a clear decision from this Government to allow Gibraltar not to conform to the provisions of a directive that we deem to be necessary for the UK as a whole.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) raised Scottish limited partnerships, and I am glad about enforcement. Many of these issues need to be explored further during the passage of this Bill, which is sadly necessary. The Bill overreaches in some areas by giving the Government too many powers, but in other areas it misses opportunities that we need to take in order to provide assurances that we are taking the necessary and swift action to fight corruption. The Bill is an all right start, but it clearly needs further improvement. We should maintain the positive changes already inserted by the House of Lords, and I look forward to exploring the detailed issues as the Bill progresses through the House.

8.34 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson). I also pay credit to her husband’s work at Transparency International. I think he came up with the phrase that, as we leave the European Union, we should be “a beacon, not a buccaneer”. That is the spirit in which I approach the Bill: we should look to set the highest standards for transparency and financial probity, not try to get some short-term advantage by short-changing on those important issues.

I want to focus on three matters. The first is sanctions, which I raised with the Secretary of State earlier. I accept that if we freeze other people’s assets, we should not try to take part of them. However, in rare situations when we freeze the assets of regimes that have caused or committed serious offences in our country that have done real harm to our citizens, it is perhaps right to say, “Those assets are there and there is no realistic prospect of getting compensation to the victims in any other way than by using them.” In those rare situations, rather than letting people continue suffering from the injuries that were done to them, should not we be able to use the assets to try to rectify the wrong, if only slightly? I cannot imagine many instances in which that would apply, but it would clearly apply to the victims of the previous Libyan regime, which supplied Semtex to the IRA. I hope that, when the Government consider licensing the use of assets that have been frozen, we would help those victims of events that took place at least 20 years ago, if we could find a way to do so. How much longer will they be around to benefit from compensation, even if we could agree it with a Libyan Government—if there ever were one that would do so?

I heartily support the arguments for the need for overseas territories to have public registers of beneficial ownership. I do not want to repeat the arguments, but I will add a couple. It is sometimes asked why the overseas territories should have to lead, and argued that they should be able to follow the rest of the world. It is claimed that if they act first, they will be at a disadvantage and lose revenue and business will be driven elsewhere, to even murkier regimes. The problem with that argument is that our overseas territories are such a large part of the market for the activity that we are discussing that, if they do not reform, nobody else will. We cannot follow the market—we are the market here. We have to take a lead. We have to say to our overseas territories, “You have to do this. We don’t want you to be accused of having dirty, corrupt, criminal money. We don’t want you to have it or be accused of having it. The only way that we and you can show that you have clean regimes is to have this transparency.”

I suspect one of the reasons why the overseas territories can attract such large amounts of business is their relationship with the UK, their protection by the UK, the rule of law that we help them have and their access to our financial market. There is a very real link between what they do and what happens here. We therefore have some obligation to act to ensure that they have the same standards as we have. We cannot just wash our hands and say that it is for them and that they are independent and can do what they like. They benefit greatly from their links to us, and the time has come for us to say that we need them to move to the same standards as we have and that they cannot be allowed to weaken our reputation. Everywhere else in the world thinks that they are part of the UK. Developing nations say, “What you’ve done is great, but our assets have been stolen and are being hidden by your territories and we can’t get at them or find out exactly where they are.” Everyone thinks that they are part of us and it damages our reputation if they do not adopt the same high standards.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) who said that we cannot force that on overseas territories overnight. We have to give them a sensible and fair timeframe and we would much prefer them to choose to put the transparent register in place instead of our forcing them. I, too, would support an amendment that provided for a realistic and fair timetable, but we need the Government to tell the overseas territories that they want and expect them to do it and that, if they have not done it by the deadline, the Government will make them do it, so that we get that open, clear and transparent standard.

Let us be honest: the Government’s actions in the UK to increase transparency have been mostly extremely good. We have the open register of beneficial ownership for companies, although we need to sort out some of the Companies Houses details. A few weeks ago, the new power of unexplained wealth orders came into effect. But if devious people can hide from our regime by using our overseas territories, all those things will be for nothing. We need to extend these powers much more widely.
I am not usually keen on our transposing EU directives where we do not need to do so, but it would be a terrible situation if we were not to implement something consistent with the fifth EU anti-money laundering directive and were lagging behind. If we read what is in there, we see that it contains some things that we should do, such as having a cap where we do not have a register of who has a pre-paid card, so that someone cannot spend laundered money around the world using such a card. That is a perfectly sensible measure to take.

The directive also contains provision for the register of trusts in certain situations. It would be a strange situation if the country in Europe that probably has the most trusts was the only one that did not have any transparency. That would hardly aid our reputation for being a clean financial centre, which is what we should be keen to establish. I am not particularly fussed whether the Government implement the fifth directive before we go or whether we introduce similar, equivalent or, we hope, stronger measures of our own, but let us not fall behind on those sensible ideas that the EU has come up with. I am not aware that we opposed them in the EU. I believe that we agree with the direction of that directive, so let us get those things into force.

The third point I wish to cover is the property register. I have served on a few Bill Committees in my time and I have occasionally tabled amendments in my misspent youth; occasionally I have asked for reviews, as that has been the only way of getting things tabled. In general, the Government’s response is, “There is no point putting into a Bill a requirement for a review, as we review things in any case.” Yet in clause 44, on the property register, what we have managed to get is a requirement for three annual reviews of the progress the Government are making on their own policy. I accept that that was the result of a compromise in the House of Lords, but I, too, would love to see real progress made on this property register, as it is an important missing link in our transparency.

I followed that debate in the House of Lords, and I found Lord Ahmad’s argument convincing: if we are going to have this register, we want it to have real meaning and teeth, and if the reward for a delay is that we can have a mechanism in law that means that if someone does not disclose the beneficial ownership of that property correctly, we can prevent them from selling it in future, that is a price worth paying for a delay. That would be a real consequence: if someone does not register who really owns a property, they cannot sell it until they do. That would be a powerful message to send out to say that we do not want dirty money buying property in this country; that if we think someone has bought a property with dirty money, we will impose an unexplained wealth order and try to work out whether we should get that money back off them; and that if they just do not tell us who owns that property, they are not allowed to sell it until they do. That would be a real step forward, so I am reluctantly prepared to accept that we need to wait a couple of years to get those powers in a place that will be effective. I hope that as this Bill proceeds through this House we can have the same assurances that were given in the Lords that the Government are committed to that register and that we are not just left with three years of reviews, at the end of which we have made no progress on that situation. The Government have committed strongly to that register again, and I look forward to it.

If ever we needed a reminder of how important the measures in this Bill are, we need only look at a story again today of a large bookmaker being fined millions of pounds. One of the reasons for that was that it did not prevent money laundering through its shops for several years. I declare that I went to a charity darts tournament sponsored by that bookmaker, to get a donation for a charity in my constituency—that is on the register and I declare it. This just shows that money laundering is not just about large amounts of very clever things moving around the world, as the “McMafia” credits showed; it is everyday activity, and we need everyday businesses to be on their guard in preventing this from happening. So I support the fact that the Bill retains those important powers going forward.

8.44 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), who made a thoughtful contribution on some of the gaps in this Bill. Perhaps it is because I am, with him, the co-chair of the all-party group on anti-corruption, perhaps it is because in the last Parliament I was our Front-Bench spokesperson on the Criminal Finances Bill or perhaps it is because I am in front of the TV too much at the weekend, but I get the sense that money laundering is everywhere of late.

As the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned, we heard this morning of the record £6.2 million fine slapped on William Hill for not being vigilant enough in the prevention of money laundering. We have seen how the proceeds of crime have been funnelled through its channels, and the Gambling Commission has said that it must do better—as if it did not have enough on its plate with responsible gambling.

It has just finished, but for a while Sunday night was “McMafia” night—it is now “Homeland” night again in our house—and as the plot unfolded, we saw how billions of pounds can be transferred internationally very quickly, at the click of a mouse on a laptop. It also showed corrupt politicians, violent police, counterfeit goods hawked around high streets and all sorts of other things. It was fiction, but there was some factual basis.

No one so far has spoken against the idea of having such a Bill. The principle is good. No one is saying that we should turn a blind eye to dirty money. My worry is that, as right hon. and hon. Members from all parties have said, the Bill could do better and go a lot further. It is a good start, but the Paradise papers and Panama papers shone a light on a murky world of international finance and taxation working for the benefit of those with access to vast wealth and an army of lawyers—for the few, not the many—when ordinary citizens just want a fair and transparent financial system. So two cheers for the Bill.

The glaring omission, which has been mentioned many times, is that the Government need to work a lot harder to persuade the UK’s overseas territories—and we heard that today, I hope, the Crown dependencies, too—to adopt the same level of transparency as we have in the UK and introduce public registers of beneficial ownership.

It is not for nothing that London is frequently named as the world’s money laundering capital. In 2016, the Home Affairs Committee concluded that the London property market was the primary avenue for the laundering of £100 billion of illicit money a year. As a London MP,
that is particularly galling to me, because my inbox and postbag are full of housing issues, which also come up a lot when people come to my surgeries. We have a housing crisis, with people who want to get a foothold on the ladder and people in substandard accommodation.

It is not enough to think that it is not our problem; otherwise, silence equals complicity in what are becoming industrial levels of tax avoidance and evasion. The Bill will allow us to set our own sanctions and anti-money laundering policy, but our leaving the EU will inevitably damage our ability to influence the policies of the bloc. Britain’s voice will be quieter on the world stage and its global footprint will diminish. We will shrink in our role fighting corruption globally.

Some progress has been made in the adoption of private registers, but not all overseas territories have even adopted one, and if they have, they have not been centrally located or fully populated. Four and a half years on from when the Government tried to persuade the overseas territories to adopt public registers, none has so far done so, and the Government seem to have given up on them. As has been said many times in this debate, only Montserrat has made the commitment.

The ghost of David Cameron seems to have been ever present in this debate. He invited the world to an anti-corruption summit in London in May 2016—how long ago it all seems—and talked about how the public register model should be a “gold standard”. He said that tax avoidance schemes “are quite frankly morally wrong”. Again, there is that disjuncture between what is legally possible and what is morally correct.

Fast forward to 2018 and the Foreign Office expects the UK tax havens to adopt the public register model only when it becomes a “global standard”. There is a definite shift there. It is hardly leadership; it is followership, backtracking or a dereliction of duty, if we are being blunt.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is uselessness.

Dr Huq: Absolutely; my hon. Friend is so correct, as ever.

We all know what happened to David Cameron next: his ill-judged referendum was his downfall. Ironically, the EU seems to be taking the lead as it prepares to implement the fifth anti-money laundering directive. Our chaotic approach to Brexit and the slippage—we do not know what will or will not apply—is why the Bill is necessary. Last December, the EU agreed that all its 28 member states should establish public registers of the beneficial ownership of companies. We can all get behind the reasons: they allow greater scrutiny of the beneficial ownership of companies. We can all get behind the reasons: they allow greater scrutiny of the beneficial ownership of companies.

When that happens in 2019, the UK Government should seize the opportunity to ensure that our overseas territories follow suit as soon as possible. Regulatory alignment is a popular watchword these days, and we should apply it in this situation. The territories that rely on wealth being stashed away from taxpayers are astute. They do it because they can get away with it, and they use the arguments of competitiveness and security against a centralised register. Our Government continue to drag their feet after so much promise, which is shameful.

The Government’s anti-corruption strategy was hastily rushed out—some Conservative Members did not notice it—because of harrying by people such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), who had several debates on it at the end of last year. We kept saying, “Where is that anti-corruption strategy?” and the strategy was hurriedly rushed out at the end of last year. There is full awareness of the importance of public registers, but the strategy states: “Our ultimate aim is that public registers become the norm. If this were to happen”—

suddenly it has become conditional— “we would expect the Overseas Territories to follow suit. The Government will continue to work with these Overseas Territories to strengthen their beneficial ownership arrangements.”

The Government also promise a statutory review by December 2018. Why not now? It seems we have had a year of nothing, with the smokescreen of a consultation thrown in. People have consultation fatigue and we know what the issue is.

How can the Government aim for something if they are taking no action? It is not good enough. Only when the UK mandates the overseas territories to create the registers will transparency flow, and only then will the big question be sorted out, with all its constitutional, ethical and international dimensions—people have talked about foreign aid. It is right to hold the Government to account on the promises they have made, as the all-party parliamentary group will continue to do. I hope that the anti-corruption tsar, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), who has gone from his place—I would have liked a tsarina—will continue to hold the Government’s feet to the fire.

I should give a short plug for the APPG. We recently had an event where we had the cast and crew of “McMafia” in the building—my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) was there. It is not just fiction, but is happening in the real world. They launched an app. If people enter their postcode, they can see how many secretive jurisdictions are near them. The programme showed Kensington and these smart central London properties, but it is happening in Ealing. I put in my own postcode: Ealing is the 14th most secret neighbourhood in the country.

We are lucky enough to live in one of the most desirable cities in the world, but it is desirable for the corrupt, too—those with dirty cash to stash and launder. The Government agreed to fix that at least two years ago, but no concrete progress has ultimately been made. There are loads of examples—I will not go into them all now because we could be here forever. There were stories of “from Russia with cash”, Magnitsky was mentioned in the debate, and there is the pop princess from Uzbekistan. My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking had a debate on the Azerbaijan laundromat case, and we have had Bywater Investments and North Korean shell games. The list goes on and on.

This country has a real choice ahead in defining what kind of country we want to be post Brexit. We can put an end to the millions of pounds of stolen money
flowing through London's luxury property market or we can continue turning a blind eye, kicking the can down the road, saying that we are doing a consultation, pushing these things into the long grass and making London an even more appealing playground for the corrupt.

Thankfully, the other place wants significant concessions on the Henry VIII powers that might have come to pass. We have heard mention of statutory instruments, but this House must be vigilant and ensure that the Government do not try to sneak in more secondary powers through the back door, giving Ministers carte blanche.

Leaving the EU will undoubtedly affect our ability to sanction regimes properly. We will be vulnerable to legal challenges because corporations will see us as an easy target outside the EU. They will have an easier task drawing on the Henry VIII powers that might have come to pass. They will have an easier task pursuing a smaller state. Despite the Bill's title, only one and a half of its 59 pages are dedicated to anti-money laundering regime that can respond adequately to the flow of international money into London's housing market, the use of overseas investment vehicles to pay for that property and the resentment stoked in Londoners when such investment vehicles have been used as mechanisms to shield the proceeds of crime or evade tax, with property left empty. I therefore appreciate the confirmation from my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) that the Government believe that foreign owners of British homes and offices should now be treated in the same way as owners of British companies. As he says:

"More than £122bn of property in England and Wales is owned by offshore firms. If they're clean and reputable...they'll have nothing to fear. But if murky shell companies have bought British property with plundered or laundered cash, we don't want them here."

The register should underline the UK's commitment to being a strong, reputable trading nation that welcomes clean investment. Those values must surely shape our nation's future as we chart our new path outside the EU.

In that regard, the Government might consider new measures to facilitate information sharing between banks and regulators on suspicious entities or individuals so that we can encourage a proportionate, risk-based approach to whether to take on such business.

I welcome the ability that the Bill gives us to update counter-terrorism financing legislation, as well as clause 44, which commits to a register of beneficial owners of overseas entities. Nobody wants to discourage investment into the UK, particularly if such investment can help to increase housing supply by getting large-scale developments off the ground. None the less, the current approach cannot go on.

For goodness knows how long, I have been writing a book about London in the 21st century, covering the flood of international money into London's housing market, the use of overseas investment vehicles to pay for that property and the resentment stoked in Londoners when such investment vehicles have been used as mechanisms to shield the proceeds of crime or evade tax, with property left empty. I therefore appreciate the confirmation from my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) that the Government believe that foreign owners of British homes and offices should now be treated in the same way as owners of British companies. As he says:

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The register should underline the UK's commitment to being a strong, reputable trading nation that welcomes clean investment. Those values must surely shape our nation's future as we chart our new path outside the EU.

8.59 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): As I have been sitting here listening to the debate, I have had a growing sense of déjà vu with regard to a similar sedentary vigil just before the recess when we debated the Nuclear Safeguards Bill. That is an important piece of legislation that we need as we leave the EU and seek quickly and safely to reproduce the benefits of our EU membership. It is in the same vein that we consider sanctions and anti-money laundering provisions. We must have arrangements in place not only because sanctions and anti-money laundering provisions are important causes, but because we have international duties to fulfil. This must be done, as is widely accepted across the Chamber.

Nuclear safeguards are of course high-impact, but also relatively easy to define and understand. That makes things a bit easier. We have civil nuclear matter, we need it, we want to move it, and we do not want it to fall into the wrong hands. Our current arrangements work, and we want to continue to have the same level of protection and safeguards. We cannot say the same about this area of murky finance, with money moving across boundaries and individuals profiting from criminal activities and then seeking to legitimise that wealth elsewhere. This is an ever-changing world, so our arrangements must be able to keep up. As we have heard very powerfully from Members throughout the Chamber, our current arrangements leave a lot to be desired. It would therefore be remiss of us just to lift...
and shift current systems; we should seek to improve them, and I will suggest a couple of ways in which we might do so.

First, I want to address the issue of the EU’s fifth anti-money laundering directive. This has now been agreed in principle between the EU and member states, of which we are still one, but it is scheduled for a phased introduction from next year, presumably falling during a post-Brexit transitional period. We have not had a lot of clarity from those on the Treasury Bench about how we will approach this. I hope that we will not see a request for us to concede a boatload of secondary legislation to Ministers. There was considerable interest about that in the other place, and I think we can do better. Even the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), who is not currently in his place, said that we ought perhaps to transpose the directive into our law. When we hear the hon. Gentleman talk about transposing EU directives, we really are in a special place.

So what could we do about our sanctions regime? Currently, we lag behind the US and Canada. We need a targeted, flexible approach that promotes human rights and protects innocents from paying the price for the crimes of their leaders. That is why we have heard many voices call for Magnitsky-style amendments to the Bill. I add my voice to that. Such provisions allow us to pick and choose public officials from around the world who have committed human rights abuses or violations, and seize their assets and ban their travel. Such sanctions work because they target the wrongdoer specifically. A broader sanction or embargo at a national level punishes all, and often those who can least afford it bear the burden. Instead, such provisions target the people we need to get to. They would give Ministers flexibility and promote our attempts to meet our human rights goals as a country. We could underpin that—I am very keen on this, and it has not been mentioned yet—with humanitarian impact assessments of any sanctions that the Government impose. When our Government seek to impose sanctions, it is reasonable that we ought to have a clear understanding of their impact on the wider community in the affected area.

With regard to the anti-money laundering provisions, I start with the obvious: it is time for a property register. The initial commitment was made by the Government in 2016; we are now told that it will be operational in 2021. That will not do. This Bill is a good opportunity for us to pick up the cudgels and get on with it. Bricks and mortar is an obvious place to start, where we can disrupt the supply chain and follow the money. That would also have benefits in affected communities through releasing properties for people who actually wish to live in them.

That would help us at home, but we need to take on the broader challenge across the world. We will have failed if we get to the end of the process with a gold-standard piece of legislation—as I very much hope we will—but find that those high standards can be easily circumvented through a British overseas territory or Crown dependency. I know that this is controversial and there are strong feelings on it, but while we have a relationship whereby this Parliament has responsibility for defence, security and foreign relations in those territories, we should continue to take a strong interest in money laundering, because it sits at the very root of all those things. When the British Virgin Islands is at the heart of the Panama papers and Oxfam rates Bermuda as the No. 1 worst corporate tax haven, we should want to act and use all the tools that we can. Notwithstanding the qualifiers heard from the Government Benches, it is not too much to ask that we should see a public register of beneficial ownership of companies in the overseas territories and Crown dependencies.

The final way we could improve is by looking at the role of the banking system in preventing money laundering. We know that banks are under pressure to serve the bottom line and that they can have their heads turned when they encounter potentially profitable customers. We also know that relative to estimated levels of money laundering, regulatory fines have been low. When penalties are low, rewards for looking the other way are high. When there is little personal reputational risk, these things can happen.

The current legal framework is inadequate, and we should seek to change it. Two years ago we had a consultation on creating a specific “failure to prevent economic crime” offence, which would have covered money laundering. That was downgraded to a call for evidence, which closed in March 2017. It has been nearly a year, and we have not seen the fruits of that. I know as well as anybody what 12 months can do in life—it has been a big 12 months for me—but it is time we got around to this.

In conclusion, how we approach the Bill will tell us a lot about Britain’s place in the world post Brexit. Do we still believe that we have an outward-looking leadership role? Do we still seek to set high standards for ourselves and others? Are we keeping up with the pace of the modern world and the changing nature of crime? I believe that we ought to want to do all those things, and that we can use this Bill to do so.

9.5 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), who spoke so eloquently. I welcome the Bill, but like so many other Members who have spoken this evening, I think we should be doing more.

It is not in our interests to have lax standards. It is in our interests to have the highest standards, which I know the Foreign Secretary and others are trying to achieve. The Bill is not just about finance; it is about power. Our finance system—the western finance system—is a source of power. Russian and Chinese oligarchs, and especially the Russians, use our finance system. That gives us influence over them. This is not just about terrorists, dodgy individuals or drug dealers. This is about changing and influencing state behaviour. I very much hope that Ministers will see it in that guise. With new forms of conflict in the world that we inhabit, financial power is a hard bit of soft power. The power to make rich people poor by freezing their assets should not be underestimated because it is a significant source of our influence.

Other Members, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), have spoken eloquently about the lack of Magnitsky elements in the Bill, which concerns me. There are no visa bans in the Finance Bill amendments, and there is no presumption of action. I remind Members that Magnitsky was a
Russian lawyer who worked for Bill Browder. He was tortured for several months and murdered, and his dead body was put on trial. That is remarkable, even by Russian standards. It would be nice if the Government had more ambition when it came to the Magnitsky elements of either the Finance Bill or this Bill.

The idea that weak or lax standards help the UK to compete in international money markets and international economies is deeply misguided. We are in danger of wagging our fingers at people like the Russians while allowing their state officials, people close to their regime and those on sanctions lists a free light to live here and use the western system.

EN+ was floated recently in the City. It has been reported that US security officials were concerned about the float and raised issues about it, as it may have been used to pay off loans to VTB, a Russian state-owned bank that is subject to sanctions. If that is the case, I would love Ministers to explain to me why it is a wise move effectively to turn a blind eye while the Russians play the sanctions process that we have put on them.

I will touch briefly on the offshore problem. I congratulate Private Eye on the work it has done in recent years to highlight the effects and the extent of offshore vehicles in the UK. When even in a place such as the Isle of Wight we have property owned by companies based in the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Jersey, Guernsey, Luxembourg or Gibraltar, the system is flawed. Lax standards are corrupting for our country and our financial system and it is short-sighted to see it otherwise; I am sure Ministers will agree. When houses in Belgravia and Hampstead are used as glorified Rolexes for the financial system and it is short-sighted to see it otherwise. The Government should give support to the overseas territories as they transition from financial secrecy to openness.

I very much hope that the Minister will pledge to continue to make aspects of the Bill tighter, consider what can be done about the missing Magnitsky elements and make a commitment to having the highest standards in the Bill, rather than following others.

9.10 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): As most hon. Members have stated in this debate, money laundering and corruption are huge issues worldwide. Although I welcome some of the measures in the Bill, I do not believe that it goes far enough.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas has already been made aware—it was mentioned in an intervention—that, as part of the recently agreed fifth EU anti-money laundering directive, all EU member states will be required to have public beneficial ownership registers by 2019. I am sure he will confirm that, whether or not the United Kingdom is part of the EU at the time of the directive’s implementation, the United Kingdom would not want any measures that are weaker than those in the directive.

This raises the question of what should happen in the overseas territories. The UK has made a start on a public beneficial ownership register, but more needs to be done in the overseas territories. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) pointed out, the problem is that many overseas territories are tax havens and as such they are home to many offshore companies willing to offer complete anonymity to their clientele, with very few questions asked.

We should note that, despite overseas territories having small populations, half of all global trade passes through them because they are tax havens, and the vast majority of the transactions are carried out by offshore companies. Let us, for example, take the British Virgin Islands. Despite having a population of only 28,000, it is home to an estimated 500,000 offshore companies, which is 40% of the total number of offshore companies in the world. Many of these offshore companies have complete anonymity and are shell companies working with nominees and powers of attorney to move around vast amounts of money. Most people faced with that information would conclude that there is something dodgy going on.

My right hon. Friend gave examples of corrupt and illegal practices that have occurred in overseas territories. We are in danger of undermining our country, allowing our state officials, people close to their regime and those on sanctions lists a free light to live here and use the western system.

We need to make sure that money offshore in these tax havens is not being used for illegal purposes. If there is an issue, it is that overseas territories have built their wealth on secrecy. If that is the case, the Government should support the overseas territories to make sure activity is based on a legitimate and transparent model of business. The Government should give support to the overseas territories as they transition from financial secrecy to openness.

There is no reason why corporate ownership transparency should cause any problems in the provision of legitimate financial services, especially considering that many other countries will be adopting the principles of transparency registers. The people who are losing out the most are those in developing countries. They are in the greatest need and the billions being diverted away from them could literally be costing lives.

I will conclude by saying that a fully operational public beneficial ownership register in the overseas territories will greatly help to curtail money laundering, corruption and criminal activity, but much more needs to be done than is set out in this Bill.

9.13 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Issues relating to sanctions and anti-money laundering have been dealt with under EU law for many decades. It is absolutely right that we in Britain should treat these matters extremely seriously and make sure that the UK has in its toolbox all the tools that it needs to take action.

The UK has taken the lead in the past. Many of my colleagues in the House have reminded us of their experience when David Cameron chaired the G8 and tax transparency was put at the top of the global agenda. I remember being in the European Parliament at that time, working with the UK Conservative-led Government to increase tax transparency across Europe by introducing country-by-country reporting for banks.

The UK must continue to lead because the City of London is the world’s leading financial centre. The financial services sector is the leading contributor to British finances. It is vital to our future economic success, and its success is based on its reputation for trust and transparency. Crime does not stand still, however, and those who want to continue to launder money will continue to try to evolve their behaviour,
moving into new dark spaces, taking advantage of digital trade and finding new ways to exploit a virtual world. No country has the tools to act alone and countries must continue to work together. Of course Britain will continue to implement anti-money laundering laws that were set in Brussels: we helped to form those laws. Action is being taken today. In today’s news, we have seen fines against William Hill, HSBC has announced a warning of a potential $1.5 billion fine for its Swiss operation and Latvia’s central bank chief has been suspended.

If we are to continue to take action against money laundering and fraud internationally as well as domestically, we must continue to have exchange of information. Data exchange is key for our security services, our tax authorities and our financial services sector. The vast majority of our financial services companies want to be able to stamp out fraud themselves. I am sure I am not the only Member to receive a phone call from their credit card company warning them that their credit card was being used fraudulently. I was in my kitchen in England while my credit card was being used in a hotel in Turkey. Our companies want to be able to access cross-border personal data because that helps them to fight crime.

Foreign Secretary, you have spoken about building bridges with Europe. You have spoken about building a physical bridge. You have spoken about building a hypothetical bridge. I challenge you to build a digital bridge: a 21st century data exchange bridge, based on the rules of data adequacy. That will ensure we keep the ability to fight crime together across the world.

9.17 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op):
I agree with many of the comments we have heard today from both sides of the House, which I would summarise as a necessary start but not good enough, not far enough, not strong enough.

One area I am interested in is arms control, which the Bill misses an opportunity to address. The arms export control system we use in the UK goes hand in hand with the sanctions system we use to stop arms getting to certain regimes. The arms export regime we operate in this country is, of course, underpinned by EU consolidated criteria. There is no mention of consolidated criteria or of bringing the arms licensing regulations into a system such as the sanctions regulations. It is, I suggest, a great shame. The Bill does not touch on that area.

All of this is all very good, but enforcement is needed. Without enforcement, there is no point and the Bill is not worth the paper it is written on. Since 2011, there have been no prosecutions by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs of people who have broken the arms export regime or broken sanctions on arms sales. What is the point of introducing a Bill with a raft of sanctions against arms sales to certain regimes if we are not going to enforce them? It is not as though during this time there have not been significant and very credible reports that arms export controls have been breached and that arms have been sold to some of the most dangerous regimes in the world. We have just failed on enforcement because HMRC is under-resourced and these issues are under-prioritised in that department.

Turning to another area, I have a constituent who is a local business owner with a foreign national. She has reported many times her feeling that the company that she co-owns has been engaged in money laundering. She reported it to Action Fraud, Sussex police and HMRC, but for over a year, nothing was done. It took us hiring forensic accountants for HMRC suddenly to realise that hundreds of thousands of pounds might well have been laundered through the company. This was a director who wanted to blow the whistle, but HMRC and Action Fraud were just not interested. That is another example of how what is written in the Bill is all well and good, but the enforcement is just no good.

When Labour Members talk about wanting to give more money to our nurses, teachers and firefighters, we are often mocked by Government Members, who say that we want a magic money tree. It seems to me that a crop of magic money trees is growing with incredible health in some of our 14 British overseas territories. They are very clean because they are laundered daily, and they clearly like the climes—the balmy 32° that it is right now—in the British Virgin Islands. I note that many of the people in the Virgin Islands never really see these trees because they are lovely brass-plate trees.

Maybe it is not the climate that encourages magic money trees to locate in our overseas territories. Perhaps they thrive as part of a protection racket to shelter the very wealthiest in our society from paying their fair share. As we leave the European Union, it is vital that we have the mechanisms in place to replace the sanctions and money laundering provisions of the EU. I commend the Government for taking the first steps, but the Bill falls very short of creating a public, central and open register of beneficial ownership for our overseas territories.

More than 70% of corruption cases surveyed by the World Bank between 1980 and 2010 rely on anonymously owned companies helping to obscure what they are doing. It is the overseas territories that fly the flag of brand Britain and endanger that flag by not opening up—[Interruption.] I am sure that you will have a moment to reply later on, Mr Foreign Secretary. You do not need to chunter from your seat. These corrupt regimes are under the British flag. We have seen in the Paradise papers how companies such as Appleby—I call them crooked Appleby—advertise themselves as respectable offshore sector companies. However, they are now suing The Guardian for telling the truth that six of their 10 offices are located in overseas territories and are involved in money laundering. What will the Bill do to help people? Not enough.

We might hear from Government Members that we cannot do much on these issues, but a raft of people from overseas territories have written to me, begging us to take action, saying that they see no benefits in the territories for people on the ground from this tax evasion. It does not benefit our overseas territories. It benefits a small, super-elite and if we do not take action on enforcement in our overseas territories, who will? The Bill must go further. If it does not, we must ensure that amendments are forced in Committee and on the Floor of the House because there is cross-party support for ensuring that brand Britain stays clean and that we kick out the dodgy dark money from our country and our overseas territories.
9.24 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to respond to the debate on behalf of the Opposition. The Bill, as many colleagues have indicated, purportedly aims to provide the UK with an appropriate system to stop the corrupt and the criminal from benefiting from our British financial system. I will first consider the sanctions-related matters before looking at the money laundering matters, although they are of course intrinsically linked.

As with much of the Government’s Brexit-related legislation, many concerns have been expressed about the lack of parliamentary oversight of the Bill’s provisions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) set out, many positive changes were made when the Bill was discussed in the other place, and they must not now be rolled back in this place. Other matters of concern persist, as indicated by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), and echoed in the calls for clarity from the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly).

We still lack clarity over the extent to which our sanctions regime will be aligned with that of the EU 27. The evidence is clear that sanctions are more effective when imposed collectively—the hon. Members for Glasgow Central and for Huntingdon made that point very well. I was disappointed by the Foreign Secretary’s comments in this regard, which I thought were contradictory; he simultaneously admitted that unilateralism might not be effective while vaunting the possibilities of a totally independent regime. There are no indications in the Bill of how we will concretely ensure the continued co-ordination that is so necessary in this area.

We heard in the debate some persuasive arguments about the need for stronger commitments in the Bill, not just fleeting mentions, on the necessity for sanctions to target those responsible for human rights violations, particularly those responsible for gross human rights violations, as in the so-called Magnitsky regimes. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) spelled out clearly the reasons for such an explicit approach. I hope that Government Members will have listened to those arguments.

Finally in relation to the sanctions-related provisions, the hon. Members for Glasgow Central and for East Dunbartonshire mentioned the need to ensure that measures are appropriately calibrated so that they target criminal individuals and terrorists, not legitimate aid agencies and financial service providers delivering legitimate services. It is essential that we have accurate and appropriately granular mechanisms in that regard.

Let me move on to money laundering. I was very pleased, as I am sure were many Members, about the informative and courteous style of debate that we have had on money laundering tonight. I am afraid that is in contrast to the comments on money laundering from the Government when introducing the Bill, which I thought were disturbingly brief. It is clear that the problem of money laundering is getting worse, not better. I will not go into all the arguments and evidence on that now, because that has been done very ably by other Opposition Members, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq). At the centre of the UK’s problems with money laundering lies a lack of transparency and accountability, both of which are essential if we are to ensure that the criminal and the corrupt do not profit from our leaky financial system.

On the issue of public registers of beneficial ownership in our associated territories, may I say what a powerful tour de force we have had from the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and for Sutton Coldfield? I am sure that the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs, as a former Home Office Minister, has a huge insight into the damage being done by the lack of transparency in this area, aiding international criminals. The Government must listen to the uncomfortable truth that he has set out so ably tonight.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) set out how long this process has been running, as the Government requested beneficial ownership registers from our overseas territories five years ago. Many Members have indicated that we have had a slippage from the Government’s initial commitments in this regard. The failure to clean up their act by some of our overseas territories is having a severe impact on their reputation. As someone who has had many meetings with representatives of those jurisdictions, and who supports them tremendously, let me say that it is not their foes but their friends who are arguing for more transparency, because we see the reputational damage that the lack of transparency is doing to them. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking said, the Government’s failure to act constitutes complicity. I agree with the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) that the UK must exercise leadership.

There has also been a lack of clarity from the Government over whether they are minded to follow EU-level developments, particularly the anti-money laundering directive known as AMLD 5. I agree with the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) about many things—we worked together previously in the European Parliament—but I am afraid I cannot agree with her assessment that we know for certain that the Government will continue to cohere with EU-level developments. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) explained very clearly why we do not have the clarity that we need.

I think it especially important to focus on the regulation of trusts. Under David Cameron, the Government argued against their inclusion in EU registers of beneficial ownership. The Foreign Secretary claimed that the UK was ahead of the rest of the EU with our register of beneficial ownership, but we have been a drag on the EU when it comes to more transparency on trusts.

Boris Johnson: A drag?

Anneliese Dodds: At EU level, we have been. David Cameron argued against the inclusion of trusts in EU beneficial ownership registers, but we now have a chance to change. I can see that the Foreign Secretary is appalled by the idea that we might have acted as a drag in that regard, but I am sure that he will be converted to the case of more transparency.

As the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire rightly mentioned, it is deeply concerning that the timetable for the foreign-owned property register has slipped so substantially. I take on board what was said by the hon. Member for Amber Valley—we already have a
register of sorts, in the guise of Private Eye’s tax haven property map—but that map was created, essentially, by mistake. It was created when the Land Registry released data, by mistake, which was then matched up with Companies House data. The Government should be delivering the register themselves. I appreciate that there should be additional disincentives, but that is not a reason not to act now.

Finally, let me say something about the issue of due diligence in relation to British company ownership. Yes, we do have a public register run by Companies House, but the responses to a series of parliamentary questions that I have tabled have shown that there is little or no oversight of the veracity of the data supplied to it. That is illustrated by the worrying case mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), to whom I pay tribute for all his effort to help his constituent. There are not enough resources in Companies House, and there is a regulatory gap in respect of those registering companies with it directly. There are even problems for those who register through company formation providers, many of which have been shown not to be fulfilling their responsibilities. In that context, it may be necessary to launch a pincer movement requiring all such firms to have UK bank accounts: at least they would then be covered by anti-money laundering legislation through the bank account system.

The Financial Action Task Force is due to report next month on the UK’s approach to money laundering and ensuring the integrity of the international financial system. I am sure Members in all parts of the House agree that it would be a huge international embarrassment if the taskforce concluded that the UK Government had chosen not to adopt measures that would help to clean up our financial system. I am afraid I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking that there are grim stains on the UK’s reputation in this regard.

Let me issue one last plea. I have been very disturbed by the Government’s decision not to defend publicly the journalists who were singled out by Appleby. It picked on British companies, the BBC and The Guardian, which were taken to court after releasing details that were in the public interest. Sadly, the Treasury team—I see that some of its members are present—has not yet been willing to condemn that behaviour. I appeal to Ministers, including those in charge of foreign policy, to do so now, and to confirm that those disclosures were in the public interest.

9.34 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said in his opening speech, this Bill is necessary to ensure that we can continue to use sanctions and anti-money laundering regulations to support our foreign policy and national security goals as we leave the European Union. We have had a lively and passionate Second Reading debate, but I sense that the setting up of a UK sanctions regime on our departure from the EU would appear to enjoy the broad support of this House.

It is often invidious in winding up a debate to pick out some speeches but not all, but forgive me, Mr Speaker, if I do that this evening, because I think the two strongest and most remarkable speeches were those of the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), with whom I worked very closely as his deputy in DFID. I appreciate the passion of the right hon. Lady: we will no doubt debate these matters at great length in Committee and on Report, and we will take on board the strength of the arguments we have heard tonight, and which, of course, we have heard before. Likewise, my right hon. Friend made an impassioned plea for humanitarian agencies to be fully considered, and I will come to that shortly. He also spoke of Magnitsky, as did many Members; I will go into more detail later, but for now I will say that this Bill has wide-ranging powers to sanction people for human rights abuse. On open registers, we share my right hon. Friend’s view on wanting to bear down on illicit money flows; as he said, the registers are open to instant access by regulatory authorities, but I quite understand his view that such action alone does not suffice.

I have a small point to make to my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly), who asked if we could publish the anti-corruption strategy; we did so in December of last year. The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) asked why nobody has been prosecuted for export control offences; in fact, there have been 23 not just prosecutions, but convictions, for export control offences in the 10 years from 2006 to 2016, and a number of these prosecutions relate to exports to countries covered by UN and EU sanctions regimes.

This being a Second Reading debate, I want to dwell on a few key principles contained in the legislation, as I have no doubt that we will discuss the closer detail further in Committee. The first such issue is that of delegated powers. They are rightly coming under scrutiny in this place today. However, it is important to recognise that Ministers implement sanctions and anti-money laundering regulations by using delegated powers now, through secondary legislation under the European Communities Act 1972, and this Bill will not change that approach. In fact, in the future Parliament will have greater oversight of sanctions than it currently does, with votes needed in both Houses when the UK acts outside the requirements of the UN, and given the need to respond quickly to global events, the Government believe that regulations remain the best mechanism for implementing and amending sanctions and anti-money laundering regimes.

There is, however, the question of creating criminal offences, as referred to by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), and I am confident this will be addressed before Report. We have listened to these concerns and we are working on a solution that we hope will be accepted by those who expressed them in another place. Indeed, Lord Judge, whom we have been talking to, and his colleagues did not disagree that breaches of sanctions should be criminal offences, and we will introduce amendments to fix this and address their concerns in due course.

On procedure, we believe we have the right balance of affirmative and negative resolutions. Regulations that implement UN regimes will be made under the negative procedure; regulations that do not implement UN sanctions regimes will be made under the made-affirmative procedure.
The hon. Member for Glasgow Central talked about the ability to amend devolved legislation as being “monstrous”. I think she slightly misunderstands the process here. Sanctions are a matter of foreign policy.

**Helen Goodman:** On negative and affirmative resolutions, the Minister is choosing to draw a distinction based on the origin of the sanctions—whether they are from the UN or the EU—but would there not be a greater logic in drawing a distinction between individual sanctions on people, which obviously have to be done quickly, and the rules of the game for the regimes, where the House would be reasonable in seeking to be consulted before they are introduced?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** The reason that we have made this distinction in terms of procedure is that we are obliged in law to implement UN sanctions. Once the sanctions have been agreed at the UN Security Council, the UK has an obligation to implement them under the UN charter. Not to do so would leave the UK in breach of international law—hence the distinction in the procedure that we are using.

Returning to what the hon. Member for Glasgow Central described as “monstrous”, I say again that sanctions are a matter of foreign policy and so are reserved to this Parliament.

**Alison Thewliss:** Will the Minister give way?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** No. We consulted the devolved Administrations—that answers a question that the hon. Lady asked—and they did not disagree with us. The ability to make changes to devolved legislation that can be used only to make changes required as a result of sanctions does not injure the devolution settlement. Their primary purpose is for a reserved matter.

Let me move on to the issue of Magnitsky. I recognise the concerns expressed about the importance of taking a stand against individuals responsible for committing gross abuses of human rights. We recognise and indeed share those concerns. I would like to make it clear that this Government are committed to promoting and strengthening universal human rights, and this Bill will permit us to do so. We already have a range of powers to take action against those who commit gross human rights abuses, most recently through the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, as amended by the Criminal Finances Act 2017. The Home Secretary also has the power to exclude individuals whose presence we believe to be contrary to the public good, and we keep track of potentially dangerous individuals to prevent them from entering the UK. To complement this, we also have a range of domestic asset-freezing powers.

We are already committed to using sanctions in this area. This is demonstrated by the number of countries against whom we use human rights-related sanctions. They include the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iran, Libya, Mali, South Sudan, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. The Bill will rightly continue this, allowing the UK to continue to implement existing sanctions regimes and to impose new sanctions in the future. I reiterate my point that paragraphs (f) and (h) of clause 1/(2) will empower the Government to implement sanctions on human rights grounds. These are broad powers that will provide maximum flexibility and allow us to include all sorts of abuses, including but not only gross human rights abuses.

I should like to refer to the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield about humanitarian access and freedoms. This is an important point. The Government recognise as having been expressed in the House about the humanitarian impact of sanctions, and we understand the need for engagement with non-governmental organisations and other humanitarian actors. We fully support the work of NGOs operating in difficult areas, and we recognise that they are important partners in delivering the UK’s objectives in challenging environments. I want to reassure the House that the Government have been actively engaging with NGOs. As part of the consultation for the Bill, we held a roundtable to understand their concerns.

Within the past couple of months, we have also met organisations involved in humanitarian, development and peace-building work.

The Bill provides a number of tools that will enable the Government to tailor each regime to help to meet the needs of NGOs. In particular, it will enable the Government to make exemptions for humanitarian reasons and to issue licences for legitimate activity. EU case law currently limits our ability to issue general licences, but the Bill will provide greater flexibility by allowing us to do so in circumstances where Ministers judge it appropriate. It will also help to prevent the exploitation of NGOs by those seeking to circumvent sanctions. We have committed to remain engaged with the humanitarian sector and to provide it with high-quality guidance on the implementation and enforcement of individual regimes. We will continue to work with NGOs and other stakeholders to develop the best possible system.

Beneficial ownership has been at the heart of tonight’s debate. We will no doubt discuss it in Committee and perhaps on Report. It is important to recognise that the UK is the only member of the G20 with a public register of company beneficial ownership. We welcome the fact that the EU is catching up with us, but, when it does, public registers of beneficial ownership will still not be a global standard. The non-EU members of the G20 will still not have them.

We hope to work with the Financial Action Task Force and other partners to establish registers of beneficial ownership as a global standard, the effect of which will be not to allow companies or people simply to shift from one regime to another and hide their assets somewhere else. In the meantime, we should remember that the overseas territories are well ahead of most jurisdictions, including many G20 partners, in developing private registers.

In the exchange of notes in 2016, the overseas territories with significant financial centres each committed to holding central or equivalent registers of company beneficial ownership and to making information held on those registers available to UK law enforcement and tax authorities. Those arrangements are almost complete, with some of the territories understandably slightly delayed by last year’s devastating hurricanes.

Moreover, the overseas territories are separate jurisdictions with their own democratically elected Governments. The UK respects the constitutional relationship with the overseas territories and Crown dependencies. It is entirely right to work consensually with them, rather than to impose legislation. The UK has only legislated directly without the overseas territories’ consent in the most exceptional of circumstances, such as on capital punishment.
We do not generally legislate for the overseas territories, and to do so would have the effect of overruling their own legislatures and could be interpreted as disenfranchising the citizens who voted for them. The overseas territories have taken great steps forward in this area, further indeed than many other jurisdictions, and I urge the House to appreciate the importance of not jeopardising what has been agreed with them.

Until we leave the European Union, the United Kingdom will continue to exercise all the rights and obligations of membership, including with respect to common foreign and security policy, sanctions and anti-money laundering. After we leave, this Government intend to continue working closely with our European neighbours to ensure our collective peace and security. Sanctions and anti-money laundering regulations will continue to be a powerful tool in that effort.

Through this Bill, the Government intend to ensure that these important foreign policy instruments continue to be fully available for the United Kingdom to use wherever it is deemed appropriate so to do. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.
Bill accordingly read a Second time.

SANCTIONS AND ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),
That the following provisions shall apply to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill [Lords]:

Committal
1. The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee
2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 6 March.
3. The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading
4. Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.
5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.
6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings
7. Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)
Question agreed to.

SANCTIONS AND ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)
Queen's recommendation signified.
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),
That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:
(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State or the Treasury; and
(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)
Question agreed to.

SANCTIONS AND ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING BILL [LORDS] (WAYS AND MEANS)
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),
That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise:
(1) the imposition, by regulations under the Act, of charges by persons exercising functions under the regulations in connection with the detection, investigation or prevention of money laundering or terrorist financing or the combating of threats to the integrity of the international financial system; and
(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)
Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose to take motions 6 to 17 together.

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

LEGAL SERVICES
That the draft Legal Services Act 2007 (Appeals from Licensing Authority Decisions)(General Council of the Bar) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 19 December 2017, be approved.
That the draft Legal Services Act 2007 (General Council of the Bar) (Modification of Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 19 December 2017, be approved.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE
That the draft Representation of the People (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 19 December 2017, be approved.
That the draft Representation of the People (Scotland) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 19 December 2017, be approved.
That the draft Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 19 December 2017, be approved.

SOCIAL SECURITY
That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Rates, Limits and Thresholds Amendments and National Insurance Funds Payments) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.
That the draft Tax Credits and Guardian’s Allowance Up-rating etc. Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

**Criminal Law**

That the draft Policing and Crime Act 2017 (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 11 January, be approved.

**Soft Drinks Industry Levy**

That the draft Soft Drinks Industry Levy (Enforcement) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

**Terms and Conditions of Employment**

That the draft Seafarers (Insolvency, Collective Redundancies and Information and Consultation Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

**Criminal Law**

That the draft Andrey Lugovoy and Dmitri Kevtun Freezing Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 19 January, be approved.

**Digital Economy**

That the draft Proposal for Designation of an Age-Verification Regulator, which was laid before this House on 14 December 2017, be approved. —(Wendy Morton.)

*Question agreed to.*

**Standing Orders Etc. (Departmental Nomenclature)**

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No.9(6)),

That the following Orders, changes to Standing Orders and amendments to Resolutions of the House be made:

**A: Select Committees Related to Government Departments**

(1) That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended in the appropriate places in the Table in paragraph (2) as follows:

(i) by inserting “Housing,” before “Communities and Local Government” in the first column, and by leaving out “Department for” and inserting “Ministry of Housing,” in the second column, and

(ii) by inserting “and Social Care” after “Health” in each place it occurs.

**B: European Committees**

(2) That the Table in paragraph (7) of Standing Order No. 119 (European Committees) be amended as follows:

(i) in respect of European Committee A, by inserting “Housing,” before “Communities and Local Government”, and

(ii) in respect of European Committee C, by inserting “and Social Care” after “Health”.

**C: Planning: National Policy Statements**

(3) That paragraph (7)(a)(i) of Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended by inserting “Housing,” before “Communities and Local Government”.

(4) That paragraph (2)(a) of Standing Order No. 152H (Planning: national policy statements) be amended by inserting “Housing,” before “Communities and Local Government”.

**D: Liaison Committee**

(5) That the Resolution of the House of 6 November 2017 (Liaison Committee: membership) be amended, by inserting “Housing,” before “Communities and Local Government”, and by inserting “and Social Care” after “Health”.

**E: Related Provisions**

(6) That all proceedings of the House and of its select committees relating to the Communities and Local Government Committee done before the passage of the Order this day (Standing Orders etc. (Departmental Nomenclature) (Select Committees related to Government Departments)) shall be read and have effect as if they had been done in relation to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

(7) That all proceedings of the House and of its select committees relating to the Health Committee done before the passage of the Order this day (Standing Orders etc. (Departmental Nomenclature) (Select Committees related to Government Departments)) shall be read and have effect as if they had been done in relation to the Health and Social Care Committee.

(8) That all proceedings of the House and of its select committees relating to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee done before the passage of the Order of 12 September 2017 (Standing Orders etc. (Departmental Nomenclature) (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) (Select Committees related to Government Departments)) shall be read and have effect as if they had been done in relation to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee.—(Wendy Morton.)

*Question agreed to.*

**Committees**

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will take motions 19 to 24 together.

Ordered,

**Foreign Affairs Committee**

That Ms Nusrat Ghani and Nadhim Zahawi be discharged from the Foreign Affairs Committee and Priti Patel and Mr Bob Seely be added.

**Health and Social Care Committee**

That Dr Caroline Johnson and Maggie Throup be discharged from the Health and Social Care Committee and Derek Thomas and Martin Vickers be added.

**Home Affairs Committee**

That Will Quince be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Kirstene Hair be added.

**Committee of Public Accounts**

That Heidi Allen and Nigel Mills be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Anne Marie Morris and Lee Rowley be added.

**Treasury Committee**

That Kit Malthouse be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Mr Simon Clarke be added.

**Work and Pensions Committee**

That Chris Green be discharged from the Work and Pensions Committee and Nigel Mills be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Mr Speaker: Order. We will come in a moment to the petition to be presented by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), so I will repeat the point that I ordinarily make: if, unaccountably, there are Members who do not wish to listen to the presentation of this petition, I hope they will leave the Chamber quickly and quietly, so that the rest of us can enjoy the mellifluous tones of the hon. Lady.
PETITIONS

Provision of LGBT inclusive education in schools

9.49 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I rise to present this petition relating to LGBT sex and relationship education. Sadly, for everybody in Hull and elsewhere in the country, the Hull equalities campaigner Colin Livett died over the weekend. He wrote this petition to ensure that no child would be left behind just because they are LGBT or struggling with their sexuality or gender identity, and it is in tribute to him that I present this today.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that LGBT inclusive SRE is to be granted mandatory status in all schools in order that future generations leave schools informed on such matters of equality and personal safety having been educated correctly about sexual relations.

Following is the full text of the petition:

*The Petition of residents of the UK, Declares that there are benefits of inclusive teaching of Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) to ensure that no child is left in ignorance; further that the Government should pledge that the updated SRE guidelines for mandatory SRE in all schools will be LGBT inclusive, which it is yet to do; and further that recent agreements made by the Government with a party which is not sympathetic to LGBT inclusive SRE following the general election on June 8th 2017, causes concern that education that is appropriate and LGBT inclusive, could be put at risk.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that LGBT inclusive SRE is to be granted mandatory status in all schools in order that future generations leave schools informed on such matters of equality and personal safety having been educated correctly about sexual relations.

And the petitioners remain, etc.*

Royal Bank of Scotland closure

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition relating to the damaging and misguided proposals to close the RBS branch in Linlithgow.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Linlithgow East Falkirk,

Declares that proposed closure of Linlithgow branch of the publicly-owned Royal Bank of Scotland will have a detrimental effect on local community and the local economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Her Majesty’s Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Royal Bank of Scotland to take into account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of this branch.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Manchester Central received funding for 30 projects, Brighton Pavilion had 13 projects funded and the figure for Birmingham, Ladywood was 29. All those areas benefit more than all the coalfield communities in England combined every single year.

This debate is about arts funding, but if we look at sports funding, the picture is not quite as bad. London has merely four times as much as the entire of the coalfield communities.

All of that prompts the question of whether this is fair or reasonable. Should my constituents not have the same access to the arts as everybody else? If someone takes a bus from my constituency, it is not like taking a city centre bus or the underground in London. It is not possible to get from parts of my constituency to the city of Nottingham and back in a day by public transport. The slightly more generous funding for the city of Nottingham, which was explained to me as benefiting my constituents, has minimal benefit, particularly for young people.

I am particularly concerned about young people. You, Mr Speaker, have always been rightly and appropriately generous in welcoming young people from my constituency to Speaker’s House. For them, it is not just a great honour; it opens their eyes and opens doors to the kind of places they do not tend to go into. You fully recognise that, Mr Speaker, as did your predecessor. Why cannot the Arts Council get its head around the fact that young people in my area do not have such opportunities?

We are talking about scores of constituencies around the country. One that I have excluded—Bishop Auckland—has one project at the moment, so it is doing very well. However, that is hardly an example of fairness. Indeed, the Bishop Auckland project demonstrates a further problem: when arts funding goes in, it tends to go into the great, historic buildings and museums. So although Bowes in Bishop Auckland is a great place and a great museum, it is not in the coalfields. Technically, it can be put down as a “coalfield contribution”, and it is a very valid contribution, but it is not a coalfield contribution at all. Even the paltry amounts are skewed by the Arts Council—

10 pm

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

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

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab) rose—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

John Mann: I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is making a passionate case. I think the bias is for London and against the regions. Not so long ago, the whole of Lincolnshire was given 25p per person. What can be done with 25p per person? That is absurd. At the same time, London was getting 14 times as much as the average across the rest of the nation.

John Mann: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I merely say that when it comes to the English coalfields, we are talking about zero, zero, zero, zero, year after year. So the young people are reliant on the schools, which do their best, but we all know that schools funding has been tight. Schools funding for the arts has been tight for successive Governments—this goes back to the Labour Government as well. It has always been tight, but it has got tighter. Where someone wants to be creative in music in Bassetlaw, there is no facility available in the community for them. Where someone wants to go into the world of theatre, they find that no youth drama is being funded by the national Arts Council. The amounts of money that are there ought to be spread to some extent, to allow us to do things.

When we bid for money, the way the Arts Council works is that it says, “We’ll give you a consultant. One of our consultants.” That consultant will advise the Arts Council on what should be done. It is a closed shop within the arts world, where they give someone they know the contract to bid for money from themselves and none of it gets into the former coalfield communities. It is a scandal. The Arts Council needs to have the integrity to open up opportunities to give us the chance to demonstrate that where we do not have the arts infrastructure to bid for money, we can do it in a different way, with its assistance, without needing that infrastructure. Where people have the time, wisdom, inclination and skills, coming from the arts world, I do not begrudge them their brilliant ideas, inventiveness and claims in respect of facilities that already exist. If those facilities were in my constituency, I would be proposing the same. But is this fair on the national level? What about not just the education but the health, not least the mental health, of young people and the importance of the arts to them?

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his contribution. He has just mentioned the very issue that I want to bring to his attention—the health institutions. Almost 50% of the nation’s healthcare institutions provide arts programming for patients, families and staff because of the health benefits of the arts to their patients. Surely if they can do it, we can see clearly the benefits that would be brought to the coalfield communities.

John Mann: It would bring a huge benefit. We are talking about small amounts of money to give us a chance with the few projects we ever put forward, which get knocked back repeatedly. It is the evidence that we lack. That requires a change of mindset in the arts world and in Arts Council England, which must say to communities—not only mine, but the many others from all corners of England—“You have the right to benefit from the arts. You have the right and we are going to help you. We are going to get in there. We are going to provide that little bit of funding that would make such a big difference.” I predict, Mr Speaker, that if the young people in my constituency were given that opportunity—

You, Mr Speaker, have always been rightly and appropriately generous in welcoming young people from my constituency. Friend.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is making a passionate case. I think the bias is for London and against the regions. Not so long ago, the whole of Lincolnshire was given 25p per person. What can be done with 25p per person? That is absurd. At the same time, London was getting 14 times as much as the average across the rest of the nation.

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Will the Minister meet representatives from the Arts Council to take them through these incredible figures and challenge them? I am more than happy to go with him. The big-picture issue is not whether it is my constituency or one of the many others that actually benefits. I shall of course fight strongly for my area, but if it was only my area that was not benefiting, one could see that we were doing something wrong. When so many scores of constituencies get no national funding whatsoever from the Arts Council, that shows that the system is wrong.

I say in a non-partisan way—the Minister will note that this affects constituencies represented by Members from different parties—that it is long overdue that this issue is addressed. The Arts Council is currently reviewing its priorities; here is a chance to direct a modicum of resource to the former coalfields to give our kids a proper artistic chance.

10.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on securing this interesting and important debate. I believe that he and I are in agreement about the vital role that the arts can and do play in binding local communities together and about the sense of pride—and enthusiasm, for that matter—that engagement with the arts can bring to individuals and to places; we are certainly in agreement about that. The Government truly believe in and recognise the power of the arts to transform places and, indeed, people’s lives. I passionately believe that and know it to be true.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, Arts Council England rightly operates at arm’s length from the Government. In those circumstances, it would be wrong for a Minister of the Crown to intervene in, or comment too specifically on, individual funding cases. I shall therefore begin by discussing the Arts Council’s role and the support that it provides at a broader level.

The Arts Council’s mission is “Great art and culture for everyone”, which it seeks to achieve through advocacy and investment in line with its 10-year plan. It works to make the arts, and the wider culture of museums and libraries, an integral part of everyday public life, accessible to all and understood as essential to the national economy and the health and happiness of society.

On the hon. Gentleman’s specific point, the Arts Council has worked very hard in recent years to ensure that investment outside London has increased as a percentage and in cash terms. He will be pleased to hear that last year some 70% of Arts Council funding was awarded outside London. Between 2018 and 2022, an additional £170 million will be invested outside London. The Arts Council is also on target to spend 75% of national lottery money outside London by April this year—that is expected in the next couple of months.

The Arts Council recognises that more can be done to ensure that more people have access to great art and culture. Its flagship Creative People and Places programme, for example, was set up to focus on the least-engaged parts of England. Current investment in that programme is more than £53 million. The scheme allows local people to have a say in the art that they want locally. It is about taking art and culture to the people. Through that programme alone, the Arts Council has reached 1,450,000 people who would not ordinarily participate in art and culture.

There are some great examples of Creative People and Places schemes working in former coalfield areas, such as St Helens in the north-west, where Heart of Glass was set up in 2015. The evidence shows that that has made a difference. Heart of Glass and St Helens library service will join the Arts Council’s national portfolio of organisations for the first time in 2018 to 2022—congratulations to them for that achievement.

Helen Goodman: The statistics the Minister has given would be reasonable if between a quarter and a third of the British population lived in London, but they do not. Moreover, although the Arts Council is at arm’s length, the Minister has under his own control a significant budget that he could use if he wished to make up for the deficiencies in Arts Council distribution.

Michael Ellis: The fact of the matter is that the Arts Council has made significant progress, as I have outlined, in delineating monies outside the London area. It is also important that my Department and I access all people throughout England. Arts Council England is focused on that too.

I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate Sue Williamson, who joins the Arts Council as director of libraries from St Helens library service, which I referred to a moment ago. She most recently delivered its award-winning cultural hubs and arts in libraries programme, and oversaw the successful application to the Arts Council’s national portfolio.

Another Arts Council-funded scheme is First Art, which is a collective of four cultural and community organisations working within former coalfields in north-east Derbyshire and north-east Nottinghamshire. It aims to bring inspiring cultural experiences within reach of everyone in Ashfield, Bolsover, Mansfield and north-east Derbyshire over the next two years. It is a very exciting programme.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw raised the issue of funding for coalfield communities at Prime Minister’s questions a few weeks ago, when he alleged an inequality of funding by comparing funding for coalfield communities with funding in the London Borough of Islington, which he mentioned again this evening. I am happy to correct that assertion on the record. Having read his letter to me following Prime Minister’s questions, I see that his figures are based on the Arts Council’s national portfolio funding only, which led to the conclusion of a discrepancy in funding. In actual fact, although the national portfolio organisation funding is an incredibly important part of the Arts Council’s work—it provides regular funding over a set period to some of England’s most vital cultural institutions—it is by no means the only form of funding it distributes. The Arts Council has established various funding streams to tackle different issues across the nation. Many of those funding streams are heavily focused on supporting areas outside London. Some 50% to 90% of the funding for the Ambition for Excellence scheme, which supports talent, leadership and ambition, will be spent outside London. Recent research showed that 91% of touring activity funded by
the Arts Council strategic touring fund was spent outside London. Some £35 million will be invested in the scheme between 2015 and 2018.

John Mann: I fear that the Minister is not quite getting it. Yes, touring people come through the wealthy villages in my constituency—I live in one—and good people like me pay good money to see these productions. But that is not in the former mining communities. In most of the former mining communities, there is zero going on. The Arts Council could not even manage to agree to fund an artistic director in my constituency and others for the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower pilgrims in 2020. We are getting zero into the coalfield areas. Let us not confuse constituency and coalfield area, as I fear the Minister is being hoodwinked into doing by the Arts Council.

Michael Ellis: No, I certainly would not wish to conflate any of those issues. As I have already delineated, the fact is that there are several examples of coalfield areas that have benefited from Arts Council funding.

As I was saying, £35 million will be invested in the strategic touring fund between 2015 and 2018. The Arts Council is continuing to work hard to create a fairer balance to its funding outside of London. It is no part of my suggestion that there is not more that needs to be done; of course there is. This is something to which the Government are fully committed. I consider that the Arts Council is doing a very good job, and Sir Nicholas Serota is doing very well. I understand that there are currently no national portfolio organisations in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, although I am sure that the Arts Council would be willing to discuss how that could be addressed in future. I know that, as he loves the arts and supports the priority that culture should and does have in our society, he will want to engage and be willing to discuss how the situation can be addressed.

I emphasise that there is investment through the national lottery grants for the arts scheme, most recently awarded to the Harley Gallery and the artist Anthony Cropper. The hon. Gentleman’s constituency has seen an increase in funding of 269% taking into account all Arts Council funding, when comparing data for 2012-13 with the current financial year.

John Mann: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Ellis: May I just make a wider point? In many cases, the perceived lack of funding in certain areas is due to the limited number of applications for funding that the Arts Council receives. This is the case in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, where the Arts Council has only received 17 applications through its grants for the arts programme since 2014.

John Mann: That rather sums up the problem across every coalfield community. Of course, there is the Harley Gallery. Prince Charles has been there on several occasions, which is not surprising given that he is directly related to the family who own the estate. It is a great investment.

People come to the Harley Gallery from all over the world. If we could get people to go there from my constituency as well, it would be even better. But let us not confuse that kind of high-end art work—as important and valuable as it is to the nation—to working in coalfield communities.

Michael Ellis: I want to do everything I can to support all parts of society to access all forms of art. The Harley Gallery is doing wonderful work, and it is open to all. I know that the hon. Gentleman will join me in encouraging people to visit that gallery and any other galleries nearby that people wish to visit.

The Arts Council recognises the need to increase levels of ambition and interest at the local level. This, of course, cannot be done in isolation. Partnerships are vital. They often extend beyond culture and tourism to include businesses, the local authority in a given area, schools and higher education establishments. In places where that co-operation exists, great things can happen. I know that, as a supporter of the arts, the hon. Gentleman will be a leader in Bassetlaw in working to make these things happen. Clearly, things do not change overnight. It is important that this House devotes time to discussion of the arts, given their importance to so many people in our country.

I again congratulate the hon. Gentleman on enabling this discussion to take place.

Helen Goodman: Before the Minister concludes, we know what the problem is, and we know it is difficult, but we want to know what he is going to do about it.

Michael Ellis: Well, this Minister is deeply supportive of our arts, our culture, our galleries and our museums—our entire sector. This Minister is going to give every ounce of support to ensuring that we support the Arts Council and other arm’s length bodies in the important work that they are doing to make sure that the widest section of society has access to the arts, crucial as we know that to be in broadening the horizons and vistas that the hon. Member for Bassetlaw has spoken of. As I have said, there is work to be done, but it is wrong, in my submission, to characterise the Arts Council in the way that it has been characterised, because it is working very hard on this, and 75% of its funding is now outside of London.

As we all know, arts and culture help to remind us of where we come from. They bring incredible stories to life and help us to step into someone else’s shoes and see the world through their eyes. This country is a world leader in culture and the arts and the Government are committed to supporting that. By continuing to inspire people through the arts, we can continue to create the practitioners of the future. With the leadership—the good leadership—of the Arts Council, the House can see that this Government are paving the way for a bright cultural future right across the nation.

Question put and agreed to.

10.22 pm

House adjourned.
registered to vote. Ahead of the general election last year, a record number of additional applications to register were submitted. The electoral register has reached a record level of 46.8 million electors, and we should be proud of that.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister may be interested to know that the turnout in my constituency of Glasgow North East at the last election was 53%, which was well below the national average. It also happens to be an area with some of the lowest incomes and highest unemployment in the country. Research has shown that low-income workers and long-term unemployed people report lower levels of political knowledge and participation in political activities than those from other occupational backgrounds. Given that they are also less likely to be on the electoral register—

Mr Speaker: Order. Sit down. What I want is a single-sentence question. Forgive me, but these prepared screeds are too long, and they are not fair to colleagues—a single sentence, and then sit down.

Mr Sweeney: Given that these low-income groups are less likely to be on the electoral register, what is the Minister planning to do to actively engage with them and get them on the electoral register?

Chloe Smith: As I say, a range of things are set out in the democratic engagement plan. I look forward to working further with the hon. Gentleman and people across parties in this House and outside it to ensure that all those who are eligible to vote do so.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the Minister confirm how she is ensuring that survivors of domestic violence can participate in our elections?

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that very important point. We should be proud that, only last night in the House of Commons, we saw hon. Members, cross party, supporting ways to make it easier for survivors of domestic abuse to be on the register. That is something that we should be proud of in this centenary year.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one way of increasing participation is through a clear and trusted voting system? Will the Government perhaps look at how they can roll out first past the post in more English elections?

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend reminds us that in the 2017 Conservative manifesto, there was the commitment to maintain first past the post as the way that we vote in this country and to roll it out to additional elections. I look forward to speaking further to him about that.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is clear that disabled people are under-represented in our democracy and our politics, but in 2015, the Minister’s Government abolished the access to elected office fund, which supported many disabled people in meeting the extra costs in standing for office. How can the Government claim to be making democracy more accessible when these financial barriers are put in their place?
Chloe Smith: The piece of evidence that I am working on at the moment relates to a call for evidence that came back from work on how to make voting in elections more accessible for those with disabilities. It is important to note that we are talking about a range of disabilities, and not just those that may be visible. That is something I am keen to focus on in my work. Indeed, I look forward to working further with the hon. Lady on ensuring that people with any disability feel able not only to participate in elections as candidates, but crucially, to register to vote.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Is it not right that, despite the concerns raised, individual electoral registration has both increased the roll and helped to reduce fraud?

Chloe Smith: That is absolutely correct. According to a 2016 report from the Electoral Commission, both completeness and accuracy have risen, and we should aim to keep it that way.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Given the Government’s determination to end freedom of movement to and from this country, might this now be an appropriate time to embrace the principle that everyone legally resident in this country should have a say in its governance? Would the Minister therefore consider introducing proposals to allow those born in other countries who decide to stay and make this country their home after Brexit the right to vote and to welcome them to our democracy?

Chloe Smith: I am considering this point—a number of points need to be taken into account as we complete an orderly exit from the EU—but the broader point is that if somebody has citizenship in this country they have the right to vote, which we think is correct.

Voting Age

2. Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of reducing the voting age to 16. [903971]

6. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of reducing the voting age to 16. [903975]

7. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of reducing the voting age to 16. [903976]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): The Government stated in their manifesto a commitment to maintaining the voting age at 18. We therefore have no plans to lower the voting age in elections. We continue to believe that the voting age should remain aligned with the age of majority at 18. This is the point at which many other key rights and obligations are acquired and is in line with international comparators.

Lucy Powell: With growing support for votes at 16 on the Government’s own Benches, including from two former Education Secretaries, the right hon. Members for Putney (Justine Greening) and for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), is not the right honourable George Osborne right when he says that the Government do not have a majority to stop this anymore and might as well get on and embrace it and get the credit?

Mr Lidington: The responsible thing for the Government to do is to stand by not just the policy we stood on in the recent general election but what we believe to be right, and it is right that the age of majority at 18 is the age at which every man and woman in this country acquires the full rights and responsibilities of adult citizenship.

Alex Cunningham: If 16 and 17-year-olds are too childish and irresponsible to vote in local or Westminster elections, should that not also apply to their ability to vote in Conservative leadership elections?

Mr Lidington: We are talking here about electing the Parliament and the Government of the country, and although some 16 and 17-year-olds exercise and demonstrate enormous responsibilities, it is also the case that we make a general protection in our law for 16 and 17-year-olds—for example, through the criminal justice system. That is another way we recognise that 18 is, on average, the right point to make that judgment.

Liz McInnes: Last week, my local authority, Rochdale Borough Council, approved a motion supporting votes at 16 that received across-party support. When will the Minister drag himself into the 21st century and get in line with the progressive and forward-thinking councillors representing the borough of Rochdale?

Mr Lidington: I am always genuinely interested to hear what is happening in Rochdale Council, but I draw the hon. Lady’s attention to the fact that 26 of our 27 EU partners, as well as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States, all have a voting age that begins at 18. I do not think that those countries can fairly be said to be not in the 21st century.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): May I encourage my right hon. Friend to follow the wise example of the last Labour Government, who, though they were in office for 13 years and made many radical constitutional changes, none the less did not bring forward proposals to reduce the voting age to 16—for very good reasons?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is spot on, and not only that, but the last Labour Government took a deliberate decision to increase from 16 to 18 the age at which somebody could buy cigarettes and knives and use a sunbed.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I agree very much with everything my right hon. Friend is saying. Is not the answer to look at all the laws pertaining to the age of majority and actually have laws that make sense? As he identifies, someone is not deemed old enough to use a sunbed at 17; can get married at 16 with their parents’ permission but cannot go out and buy a drink to celebrate; and cannot drive a car until they are 17. The law is all over the place and needs a proper review. Is that not the way forward?
Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting and valid point. I would add, of course, that we make specific protections in our law in respect of criminal justice and the asylum system, recognising that people under 18 need special protection.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): During a debate in 2015, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), said:

“I am one of those who believes that we should allow voting at 16.”—[Official Report, 17 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 572.]

Since then, a range of senior Conservatives have outlined their support, including the former Chancellor, who said that the Conservative party risked “being on the wrong side of history” if it refused to back the measure. Does the Minister agree with his colleague and will does he support votes at 16?

Mr Lidington: I stand by the manifesto on which I stood in 2017, and, as has been made clear this morning, by the position that the Labour party took for the 13 years during which it was last in government.

Steel Industry

3. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the UK steel industry through Government procurement.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): We are working hard to ensure that United Kingdom producers of steel have the best possible chance of competing for and winning contracts. I believe that the Government’s changes in procurement guidelines make that opportunity greater for UK producers, including those in Corby.

Tom Pursglove: As my right hon. Friend is well aware, we produce brilliant-quality steel tubes in Corby. What positive difference does he believe those public-sector procurement rules are making to our steel industry, and will he join me in promoting the use of British steel at every opportunity?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in his tribute to the steelworkers of Corby, and the steel industry in the United Kingdom more generally. The guidelines that we have introduced mean that purchasing authorities must take account of the wider social and economic benefits that UK producers can bring, so that contracts are not awarded on the basis of cost alone. Moreover, every public authority is now required to incorporate relevant social and economic criteria in all major construction and infrastructure projects.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): When will the Government fulfil their commitment in procurement policy note 11/16 to publish the performance of each Department?

Mr Lidington: I hope that we shall be able to do that later this year. According to the most recent information that I have, Government Departments are committed to following the guidelines, but we are carrying out checks to ensure that that is being followed through to the spirit as well as the letter.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Severfield, in Lostock at the heart of my constituency, produces architecturally significant steel structures such as the 2012 Olympic stadium and the ArcelorMittal Orbit sculpture. Will my right hon. Friend do all that he can to ensure that Government procurement buys beautiful, buys British, and buys from Bolton?

Mr Lidington: We want both public and private sector customers to buy British steel whenever possible. The Government have published a pipeline of future public procurement in which steel is needed, so that British producers can plan to bid to take part in the process.

Ethical Procurement

4. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on ethical procurement.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): The Government are committed to ethical procurement. The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 requires commissioners to consider the social benefits of their approaches to procurement, and the industrial strategy requires Departments to consider wider social and economic factors in the design of major Government contracts.

Kerry McCarthy: Another recent report has commented on the link between ultra-processed food and cancer, rising levels of obesity, and the fact that only one in four adults is eating five a day. What more can the Government do through their public procurement processes to encourage healthy, sustainable eating, and to source it from British producers?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Lady has raised an important point. As I have said, the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 enables procurers to take those wider factors into account. We are also encouraging the adoption of a so-called balanced scorecard approach whereby, in the process of procurement, we consider those wider factors. We have rolled that out for all contracts worth more than £10 million, and have extended it to the Crown Commercial Service framework for facilities management.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What additional flexibility in public procurement will be yielded by Brexit?

Oliver Dowden: One of the advantages of Brexit is that it will provide a wide range of opportunities to tailor our procurement rules to the needs of this country. Once we have left Europe, we will be considering exactly those measures.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What certainty does the Minister have that there is no direct or indirect gender discrimination anywhere in the Government’s supply chain?
Oliver Dowden: In October last year, the Government produced a code of conduct relating to Government procurement which covered precisely those points.

Government Procurement: SMEs

5. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote Government procurement from small and medium-sized businesses.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): Small businesses are the backbone of our economy and we are committed to supporting them in securing public sector contracts. Our aspiration remains to spend a third of our procurement spend with them by the end of 2022.

Chris Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Does he agree that individual Government Departments have crucial roles to play in promoting the use of small businesses in Government procurement, in order to deliver greater diversity in the firms that are awarded Government contracts?

Mr Lidington: I completely agree. We are working with Departments through the Crown Commercial Service to develop detailed SME action plans Department by Department, with every Department putting in place both a ministerial lead and a senior official with a role to champion small businesses. The figures so far show that more than half of Government Departments have increased the proportion they now spend on SMEs.

Mr Lidington: I certainly hope that that will be the case, and I believe our guidelines and approach to different Government Departments will encourage small business to secure those opportunities, but it will also be a matter for the Commons Commission.

Voter ID Pilots

8. Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that local authorities participating in voter ID pilots at the local government elections in May 2018 communicate to voters changes in the voting process.

Chloe Smith: Research by the Royal National Institute of Blind People has found that the polling cards in the Government pilot are still inaccessible for blind and partially sighted people, and are often mistaken for junk mail. Can the Government guarantee that restrictive ID requirements will not disenfranchise disabled voters?

Chloe Smith: That is an extremely good point, and it is exactly the kind of thing I was referring to in my earlier answer regarding the call for evidence on how those with disabilities might in some ways be disempowered from using the registration and voting system. In this case, I would expect the piloting local authorities to look carefully at the issue in their own work, and I will undertake to do so as well from the point of view of the Cabinet Office.

Gareth Snell: What guarantees can the Minister give people who do not currently have the necessary ID to go and vote in the upcoming elections that they will be able to have access to the photographic ID that is needed without incurring personal cost?

Chloe Smith: The local authorities involved in the pilots are ensuring that nobody will be left behind in the way the hon. Gentleman might fear. They will provide ID if a voter does not have it, in the format of, for example, barcoded poll cards or letters that are relevant on the day. Those kinds of issues remind us why it is important to do pilots to test things out.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): The award-winning elections team in Swindon will deliver one of those pilots. Does the Minister agree that it is staggering that Labour opposes a change that is no different from collecting a parcel from the post office?

Chloe Smith: That is absolutely right. Anybody who might oppose these measures should think very, very carefully. We already ask that people prove who they are when they go to collect a parcel, rent a home, buy a home, rent a car, or travel; it is normal to use ID in everyday life.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: One short sentence only; Bob Blackman.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given that voter ID is required in Northern Ireland, will my hon. Friend roll this out across the country as quickly as possible so that all elections are free and fair?

Mr Speaker: Thank you; splendid.

Chloe Smith: I will look closely at the results of the pilots to evaluate whether it is possible to go further with them. My priority is to do what we can to stamp out electoral fraud. Fraud is not a victimless crime; to have your vote abused is to have it stolen, and that is what I am looking at.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): In the context of these trials forcing people to show ID to vote, in the context of individual electoral registration resulting in 2 million people falling off the electoral register, and now it seems in the context of proposals to
make postal votes harder to obtain, why is it that every change the Government bring in makes it harder for people to vote? Why are they scared of people voting?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Gentleman is blowing this out of all proportion. Let us not forget that we already use ID to register to vote. What we are talking about here is proving that the person who is voting is the person who registered. Let me return to an earlier answer and say that individual electoral registration has increased the accuracy and completeness of the register. I think that the hon. Gentleman is misunderstanding his own point.

Topical Questions

T1. [903985] Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): I was pleased to be able to announce that Mr Justice Langstaff will serve as chair for the independent inquiry into the infected blood scandal. He is a highly experienced judge who I am confident will conduct a thorough inquiry. Over the coming weeks, he will be talking to those affected to set comprehensive terms of reference, and the Government will provide him with all the support he needs. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. The Minister’s answer could hardly be heard. Let us hear the voice of Amber Valley. I call Mr Nigel Mills.

Nigel Mills: I thank the Minister for his answer. What plans does he have to use the events marking the centenary of women’s suffrage to encourage greater democratic participation?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): During this centenary year, we will host the first education-themed events to inspire young people and underrepresented on the electoral roll, and a package of down the country that will focus on those who are to help to deliver a unified programme of events up and national democracy week. We have established a council for having more such opportunities in Scotland.

T2. [903986] Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): All of us in the House will have been saddened last week by the tragic death of a homeless man just yards from here. Will the Minister tell us how the Cabinet Office is working with all Departments to ensure that this crisis is resolved quickly?

Mr Lidington: Any such death is a tragedy. The Government have established an inter-ministerial group to drive forward our objective of halving rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminating it altogether by 2027. I am playing an active part in that work.

T3. [903987] Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): What plans does my right hon. Friend have to move more civil service jobs outside London, and has Scotland been considered as an excellent destination for Government Departments or agencies?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): The Government are committed to moving activities away from London and the south-east. There is a presumption that all new non-departmental public bodies should be outside London, so we have created Government hubs across the UK, including in Edinburgh and Glasgow. My hon. Friend makes a marvellous case for having more such opportunities in Scotland.

T5. [903989] Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Dounreay in my constituency is being decommissioned, and it is crucial that both levels of government should work in harmony to ensure future employment for the people of my constituency. Canada and Australia typify joint working between levels of government. Will the Minister work very hard indeed to ensure that the Scottish Government and the UK Government work together to allay the fears of my constituents and to provide future employment?

Mr Lidington: I completely understand the importance of Dounreay to the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. The Government’s industrial strategy is all about trying to ensure that every part of the United Kingdom benefits from the new industrial opportunities now open to us, and my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will be working with the Scottish Government to ensure that it delivers for Caithness and Sutherland.

T4. [903988] Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Too few of our small businesses apply to sell their goods to Government because they are worried about the bureaucracy involved. What reassurance can the Minister give them and, specifically, what feedback is available to them when they do so?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Small businesses are the engine of our economy, and we are committed to supporting them in public procurement. That is why we have already streamlined our procurement processes to assist small businesses by, for example, abolishing complex questionnaires. Specifically in relation to too much bureaucracy, businesses can report such practices to the mystery shopper service.

T6. [903990] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On what date were Government officials first instructed to work on draft amendments to clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill?

Mr Lidington: Work on clause 11 has been going on for a long time, to deliver on our commitment to table amendments during proceedings in the House of Lords—with the agreement of the Scottish and Welsh Governments if humanly possible.

T7. [903991] Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Will my hon. Friend mark the centenary of women’s suffrage by giving Government support to the Overseas Electors Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) to enfranchise British citizens who have lost the right to vote?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I intend to speak on the Government’s behalf during the Bill’s Second Reading on Friday. The proposal is an important Conservative manifesto commitment, but I hope that it will also command cross-party support.
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My colleagues in Edinburgh will be voting today to scrap the public sector pay cap and give a 3% pay rise to those earning under £36,000. When will public sector workers in England see a similar rise?

Oliver Dowden: Public sector workers are among the most talented and hard-working people in our society, and they should be fairly rewarded. In respect of the Cabinet Office, the Chancellor’s Budget statement confirmed that we are moving away from the 1% average public sector pay award, and proposals will be issued later this year.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I wish my right hon. Friend every success in his forthcoming meeting with the Scottish and Welsh Governments this week. Will he bear in mind that he is being compromising and open, and will he invite them to be the same?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right to point to the importance of all parts of the United Kingdom working together to deliver an orderly, smooth Brexit. We want to work in partnership with the Scottish and Welsh Governments to deliver a big increase in the powers devolved to their Parliaments and Governments.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s announcement about the appointment of Sir Brian Langstaff as the judge for the public inquiry into contaminated blood, but will he reassure the House that the inquiry will have a families-first approach, that an outward-facing secretariat will support all those affected, and that meetings will be held around the regions and nations of this country?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady will understand that Sir Brian, as the independent chair, will ultimately determine such matters, but I was struck when I met him by his determination both to listen to the views of the families who have been worst affected by the tragedy and to ensure that those views are fully taken into account.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [903955] Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 21 February.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Ruth Cadbury: On Monday, children and parents at St Mary’s Catholic Primary School in Chiswick told me of their concerns about air pollution affecting children’s health. This morning, the High Court ruled that the Government’s air quality plan is unlawful. What does the Prime Minister feel is worse: losing for the third time in the High Court, or 40,000 unnecessary deaths and the impact on children’s health of the UK’s unsustainable air quality?

The Prime Minister: The issue the hon. Lady has raised about air quality is important, and that is why we have been taking action to improve air quality. I say to her that I do not think that the way she has described the Court’s decision this morning properly reflects the Court’s decision. Let me just explain to the House that we welcome the fact that the Court dismissed the complaint relating to five cities with major air quality problems and found that we are taking appropriate action. It agreed that the modelling we used to support the 2017 air quality plan is sound. It has asked us to go further in areas with less severe air quality problems where we thought a pragmatic approach was appropriate; we will now formalise that. But actually, on two of the three counts, the Court found in the Government’s favour.

Q2. [903956] Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The people of Willenhall and Bloxwich want to see more police on the streets, and I have lobbied the Police Minister for funds to put more police on the streets. Will the Prime Minister join me in urging the Labour police and crime commissioner to put more police on the streets instead of increasing his budget for back-office staff by £10 million?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, and he is right to speak up for his constituents in relation to this matter. He is also right, because this Government have been keen to ensure that police are out there, not in back-office jobs. More money is going to policing—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Please, the questions and answers must be heard, and I make no apology for repeating that the discussions here at Prime Minister’s questions should bear some resemblance to what the House is saying in relation to culture. We have recently had a report on harassment. Let us try to behave properly in these sessions. That means listening to the answers and listening to the questions. Both sides of the House have got to try to wake up to the reality that huge numbers of people outside this place—I could not care less about the Press Gallery—disapprove of this sort of behaviour. On both sides, stop it.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The funding settlement for next year provides extra money for policing, which means that West Midlands police will receive an increase of £9.5 million. Of course, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) says, it is up to the West Midlands police and crime commissioner—a Labour commissioner—to decide how he spends that money, but I know that police forces can be more effective and productive, and I am sure my hon. Friend will make his case very strongly to the Labour commissioner.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Yesterday the Brexit Secretary assured the country that Brexit will not plunge Britain “into a Mad Max-style world borrowed from dystopian fiction.” Does the Prime Minister not feel that the Brexit Secretary could set the bar just a little bit higher?
The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are very clear that we are going to ensure that, when we leave the European Union, we are able to take back control of our borders, our money and our laws. The only fiction in relation to Brexit and the European Union is the Labour party’s Front Bench, who cannot even agree with themselves on what their policy is.

Jeremy Corbyn: One of the Prime Minister’s former Brexit Ministers in the other place warned her that Britain will be walking a “gangplank into thin air” if she does not decide what she actually wants on leaving the European Union.

In his speech, the Brexit Secretary also said that fears about a deregulatory “race to the bottom” were “based on nothing”. Why, then, did his own Department’s exit analysis state that there could be opportunities for Britain in deregulating areas such as environment and employment law?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about what we actually want to achieve when we leave the European Union. I will tell him what we want to achieve: we want to ensure that this is a country that can negotiate free trade deals around the rest of the world; we want to ensure that we have a good trade agreement with the European Union, and that is what we will be starting to negotiate; and we want to ensure that we have a good security partnership with the European Union, as I set out in detail in my speech in Munich last week. But we also want to ensure that this country takes the opportunities that will be open to us outside the European Union to boost our economy and to ensure that we develop the economy of the future and jobs for the future—more high-paid, high-skilled jobs for the people in this country. We are putting the people first.

Jeremy Corbyn: In December, the Foreign Secretary and the Environment Secretary were briefing that the working time directive would be scrapped. The CBI and the unions are very clear that they are not looking for a deregulatory “race to the bottom” were “based on nothing”. Businesses and workers want protections is the party opposite.

In her Lancaster House speech a year ago, the Prime Minister clearly stated:

“I also want tariff-free trade with Europe”.

Now, a year on, she has downgraded that aim to “as tariff-free as possible”. Businesses and workers want tariff-free access to protect jobs, so why have the Government abandoned that for “as tariff-free as possible”?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that the Government have not abandoned their negotiating position in relation to this; we will be ensuring that we get that good, comprehensive trade agreement—new economic partnership—with the European Union. He also mentions workers’ rights. I have been clear since I became Prime Minister that this Government will not only protect workers’ rights, but enhance them. Let us just look at the Conservatives’ record in government. Which Government took action on zero-hours contracts? It was a Conservative Government, not Labour. Which Government got Matthew Taylor to report on the new economy, so that we ensure workers get the highest rights? It was a Conservative Government, not Labour. Which Government are ensuring that workers’ voices are heard on the boards of companies? It is a Conservative Government, not Labour.

Jeremy Corbyn: I do not know whether the Prime Minister has had a chance to read The Daily Telegraph today, but 62 of her Back Benchers want a bonfire of regulations and to destroy workers’ rights in this country. When the Government’s EU exit analysis was published, the Brexit Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), said:

“It does not consider our desired outcome”—[Official Report, 31 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 835.]

Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity now to tell the House and the country: what is the Government’s desired outcome?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to: a bespoke economic partnership.

Jeremy Corbyn: Okay. So, given that the Prime Minister ruled out any form of customs union post-Brexit, can she explain how she expects then to avoid a hard border with Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman and others have asked this question previously. I have already pointed out in this Chamber that the Government published papers last summer that showed how we can deliver exactly that—no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and a bespoke economic partnership with the European Union.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Foreign Secretary recently made a speech about Brexit and found time to mention carrots, spam, V-signs, stag parties and a plague of boils. There was not one mention of Northern Ireland in his speech. We are halfway through—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) must calm himself. It is not spam, V-signs, stag parties and a plague of boils. There was not one mention of Northern Ireland in his speech. We are halfway through—

Jeremy Corbyn: We are halfway through the six speeches we were told would set out the Government’s negotiating position. So far, all we have had is waffle and empty rhetoric. Businesses need to know. People want to know. Even the Prime Minister’s Back Benchers are demanding to know, but it is not clear from today’s exchanges. This Government are not on the road to Brexit—they are on the road to nowhere.

The Prime Minister: I think I have mentioned to the right hon. Gentleman before that his job is actually to ask a question, but I am perfectly happy to respond to the points he made. He said that we have not set out any detail. May I suggest to him that he needs to think very carefully about the security partnership that we want with the European Union when we have left? I set out in my speech in Munich last week exactly what we want that security partnership to cover, because we believe in ensuring that we are maintaining the security and safety...
of people here in the UK, but also in Europe. We are unconditionally committed to the safety and security of Europe. But may I congratulate him, because normally he stands up every week and asks me to sign a blank cheque? I know he likes Czechs, but really that is terribly depressing.

Q3. [903957] Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): My constituent Evelyn Fisher was killed when a car mounted the pavement, with tests done after the incident indicating that the driver had an undiagnosed medical condition that would have needed to be assessed by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency had it been detected beforehand. What view does the Prime Minister take of the current system and rules for ensuring that those who hold driving licences are fit to drive?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised a very important point. It is absolutely crucial—of course we want to ensure this—that people who are driving are actually fit to drive. I know that the sympathies of not just my hon. Friend but the whole House will be with Evelyn’s family and friends. The current driving licence system is designed to balance road safety with the needs of the individual. All drivers must inform the DVLA if they have a medical condition that might affect their driving and should discuss any of their concerns with their own medical professionals. We take this issue very seriously and are committed to ensuring that those who are granted a driving licence are fit to drive.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): At least 194 people have been killed in the past 48 hours in Eastern Ghouta. Will the Prime Minister tell the House what discussions her Government have had with UN colleagues since Sunday on the enforcement of the existing UN resolutions that call for an end to sieges of civilian areas and attacks on civilians?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. We are appalled by the escalation of air strikes in Eastern Ghouta and deeply concerned by reports of the ongoing deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, in blatant violation of international humanitarian and human rights law. We, as the United Kingdom Government, certainly call on the regime and its backers to cease this campaign of violence. They should respect international humanitarian law, protect civilians, and allow rapid and unfettered humanitarian access. There is concern that something like 700 people who need medical evacuation are being refused that evacuation by the regime. We will continue to work with the UN and the UN Geneva-led process. The UN envoy has our full support for his work to try to bring an end to this by finding a political solution for Syria.

Ian Blackford: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer. The bombing is relentless. Doctors on the ground are treating pregnant women and babies who have lost limbs. It is estimated that well over 100 children have been killed since Sunday. The UN has issued desperate pleas calling for political intervention. It has stated:

“No words will do justice to the children killed, their mothers, their fathers and their loved ones”.

Will the Prime Minister show leadership and join me in calling for an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council to address the horrific genocide that is unfolding in Syria?

The Prime Minister: The United Nations has called on Governments around the world to call out the action that has been taken and to be ready to stand up against that action. That is exactly what this Government are doing. We will talk to our UN colleagues to ensure that the best possible approach can be taken in relation to these issues, but it is not just about the Syrian Government; it is about the backers of the Syrian Government as well. We call on all their backers, including Russia, to ensure that the violence stops, and that those people who are need of help are given that help.

Q7. [903961] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): De La Rue has been manufacturing and innovating in the UK for nearly 200 years, including at its factory in Westhoughton at the heart of my constituency. It is the only British company that is bidding to produce our new passport, with the other two bidders being French. Will my right hon. Friend commit to doing all she can to support our manufacturers and innovators, and to make our new blue passport truly British?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that the competition will be open and fair. I cannot comment on individual bids, but I am sure that he will make his voice heard. It is right that from autumn 2019 we will issue new blue and gold passports, which have always been the UK’s colours of choice for our passports. It is absolutely right that after we leave the European Union, we return to deciding the colour of passports that we want, not that the European Union wants.

Q4. [903958] Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): My constituent, Claire Throssell, suffered terrible tragedy when her two children were murdered by their father in an arson attack at the family home. This brave woman has since dedicated herself to campaigning for victims of domestic violence to receive better protection from the family courts and the various public services concerned. Will the Prime Minister tell us when the domestic violence Bill will be published? Will it be as comprehensive as she promised when she announced the intention to legislate?

The Prime Minister: Our thoughts are with Claire following the terrible tragedy that she has been through. We recognise that we need to provide support for the victims of domestic violence. As the hon. Lady suggested in her question, there are many aspects to this issue. Before my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary brings forward legislation, she will be issuing a consultation, because we want to ensure that we listen to all those who have been affected so that we deal with all aspects of this particular issue. The Government are committed to working not only to support the victims of domestic violence, but to ensure that we end violence against women and girls.

Q9. [903963] Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I recently visited a memory café in Drighlington Methodist church in my constituency. The café is open to individuals and their carers, and helps to provide support for memory loss. I was touched by the dedication of the volunteers, and I will soon be hosting my own memory surgery, which will give local residents with memory loss the opportunity to speak about issues
affecting their lives. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to update the House on what the Government are doing to help those with dementia and to congratulate the hard-working carers of those suffering with this progressive condition?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating those many carers who are looking after people with dementia, and also volunteers who provide services for people with dementia and their carers. We are working with partners across the health system to ensure that more people with dementia than ever before receive a diagnosis, as well as to raise awareness, to ensure that people get an earlier diagnosis, and to provide the care and support that is needed. I am also pleased to say that there are now 2.3 million dementia friends across the country, and that we are doubling spending on dementia research. I will also ensure that members of the Cabinet are given the dementia friends training.

Q5. [903959] Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Last night, I attended a meeting of hundreds of Redcar residents who are deeply concerned about rising levels of crime and antisocial behaviour. Crime in Redcar has increased by 18% since 2011. We have lost more than 500 officers and suffered £40 million of cuts to our local policing budget. Will the Prime Minister commit straightaway to give back the money for neighbourhood policing? Will she apologise to the constituents of Redcar and Cleveland who have had to put their hands back in their pockets through the precept to compensate for her massive cuts?

The Prime Minister: It is good to see the hon. Lady back in the House.

As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), we are providing extra funding for police forces—[HON. MEMBERS: “No, you’re not.”] It is no good Labour Members shaking their heads and saying that, because we are providing extra funding for police forces, and it is of course up to police and crime commissioners to decide how that money is spent.

Q15. [903969] Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I am sure that the whole House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), will join me in welcoming a delegation of French MPs who are watching our proceedings today. People from across the European Union have settled in each of the 32 London boroughs in the belief that they will be able to build a life here on the basis of their EU treaty rights, so naturally they want certainty and a simple way of securing settled status. What reassurances can the Prime Minister give that a speedy, low-cost, and low-hassle system, starting from the premise that those people will be staying rather than having to apply afresh, will soon be in place to allow them simply to get on with their lives and to continue to play an important role in our economy, our communities and our culture?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to welcome—as I am sure that you are, Mr Speaker—the fact that we have been joined in the Public Gallery by a delegation of French Members of Parliament.

My hon. Friend raises a very important point about EU citizens living in the United Kingdom. They have made a huge contribution to our country, which is why we want them and their families to stay. I am absolutely clear that EU citizens living lawfully in the UK today will be able to stay. On the process of applying for settled status, I can assure him that it will not cost more than that of a British passport. EU citizens will have a period of two years in which to apply. The system will be a digital, streamlined and user-friendly, and will ensure that the process is as simple and easy for people as possible.

Q6. [903960] Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Well over 1 million people in this country are living with the consequences of acquired brain injury. The great news is that 600 extra lives are being saved every single year thanks to the Government’s new trauma centres. That is brilliant, but the problem is that although many people’s lives are being saved, they are not getting the rehabilitation support that can help them to live independent lives all over again. Miracles can be done, but half the units have no rehabilitation consultant at all. Will the Prime Minister please get together all Ministers with responsibility in this area—the Department of Health, the Ministry of Defence, the Treasury, the Department for Work and Pensions, and Ministry of Justice, which is heavily impacted—to ensure that every single person in this country who has an acquired brain injury gets the full rehabilitation that they need?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. As he may know, there are two ways in which those rehabilitation services will be commissioned. NHS England commissions specialised neurological rehabilitation centres for complex brain injury, and it does so at a national level. More routine rehabilitation is commissioned locally, although NHS England sets guidelines for commissioners to support delivery, including for brain injury. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and I will ask the Health Secretary to respond to him and the specific question that he asks.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): May I tell the Prime Minister how welcome the Policing Minister’s response to yesterday’s urgent question was, as he said that he would help Alfie Dingley to find a way through regulations to access the medicinal cannabis that he needs? Will the Prime Minister ensure not only that the Minister’s response to yesterday’s urgent question was, as he said that he would help Alfie Dingley to find a way through regulations to access the medicinal cannabis that he needs? Will the Prime Minister ensure not only that the Minister’s words go beyond the popular view of: “I’m from the Government; I’m here to help,” but that we join the majority of states of the European Union and the United States, as well as British public opinion and all colleagues who raised questions yesterday, so that we give British citizens the earliest possible access to the potential benefits of medicines derived from cannabis through a proper evidence-based process? Will she ensure that the United Kingdom is on the front foot in licensing all medical investigations that need to be done to get us these benefits?

The Prime Minister: I know that the sympathies of Members across the House are with Alfie and his family as he undergoes treatment. We recognise that people with chronic pain and debilitating illnesses will always look to alleviate their symptoms, but if we are going to
permit medicines to be used, we first need to ensure that they have been through the most rigorous testing and that we apply the most rigorous standards. We believe that cannabis should be subjected to the same regulations that apply to all medicines in the United Kingdom.

Q8. [903962] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I have previously highlighted that each Scottish Tory MP costs Scotland £265 million. It turns out that their Scottish leader is much cheaper, because the party wanted to hire her out for £15,000 a day at a Tory fundraising dinner. At that same dinner, the Defence Secretary was on hire for £30,000, while £2,000 bought the International Trade Secretary and it was £55,000 for the Prime Minister. Does the Prime Minister agree that although her party will sell anything that moves, it is time to halt the privatisation of Tory MPs and they should get on with the day job?

Mr Speaker: Order. Forgive me; I was struggling to hear. Just before I ask the Prime Minister to respond, I need an assurance from the hon. Gentleman that he is not suggesting that the presence of a Member of Parliament was bought. If he is suggesting that, it is straightforwardly out of order. Is that what the hon. Gentleman is saying?

Alan Brown: Mr Speaker, I was referring to a story that was in the newspapers.

Mr Speaker: I am afraid that that is not good enough. Forgive me—I have to make instant judgments. If the Prime Minister wishes to issue some sort of response, she is free to do so, but she is under no obligation. No? Then I call Andrew Bridgen.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Twice in the last four weeks, the Equality and Human Rights Commission has had cause to write to the Labour party regarding breaches of equality law. Does the Prime Minister agree that equality law must be applied equally, and that it exists to protect all groups equally?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to agree with my hon. Friend on that point. I was in opposition when the Equality Act 2010 went through Parliament, and we supported that Act. It is there to ensure—exactly as he says—that people are treated equally.

Q10. [903964] Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The Government’s decision to leave Euratom and withdraw from the customs union could limit our access to vital cancer treatments. The chief executive of the Nuclear Industry Association—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us just be absolutely clear about this. This question, like every question, will be heard. The hon. Lady will not be shouted down and that is the end of the matter, so if some foolish person is seeking to do so, examine your behaviour and stop it.

Tulip Siddiq: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The CEO of the Nuclear Industry Association points out that if medical isotopes that are used to treat cancer are delayed in reaching the UK, they could be deemed useless on arrival because of their short half-life. Will the Prime Minister explain how she plans to prevent delays to cancer treatment that would be caused by her pursuit of a hard Brexit?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is wrong on two counts. First, we are pursuing a Brexit that will enable us to have an economic partnership that sees freedom of trade across the borders with the European Union. But it is also the case, as we have made clear previously, that the availability of medical radioisotopes will not be impacted by the UK’s exit from Euratom. The import or export of these radioisotopes is not subject to any Euratom licensing requirements, so our ability to import medical isotopes from Europe and the rest of the world will not be affected by our withdrawal from Euratom.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for taking a personal interest by meeting myself and other colleagues from across the House to discuss getting justice for the Primodos victims? These people went to their GPs in good faith and were given a drug that resulted in the loss of babies’ lives, abortions and the birth of disfigured young people. Does the Prime Minister have any good news for the victims of Primodos so that we can put an end to this terrible situation?

The Prime Minister: I was very pleased to meet my right hon. Friend and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) to discuss this issue. I recognise that the lives of many individuals have been affected by this. There are very powerful stories of these individuals. I know this has been a concern across the whole House. The concerns raised by campaign groups about not just Primodos, but issues such as vaginal mesh and sodium valproate, have highlighted that there is an issue with our regulatory and healthcare system, and we are determined to address it. I have been clear that we need to do better. I was very struck by the powerful stories I heard. We need to see a faster, more understanding response when patients raise concerns. If my right hon. Friend can be a little patient, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will be making a statement to the House this afternoon to set out his plans for a review of these issues.

Q11. [903965] Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): It is more than eight months since the terrible fire at Grenfell Tower, but thousands of people are still living in blocks with dangerous flammable cladding, including Citiscape in Croydon. That dangerous cladding was allowed to go up because of flawed Government guidance, and there is still an average of one fire every month linked to this cladding. It is clear that this is the Government’s responsibility, so why is the Prime Minister running the risk of a second Grenfell Tower when she could act and take this dangerous cladding down?

The Prime Minister: Over the years, under both Labour and Conservative Governments, building regulations and enforcement have obviously been looked at, and the arrangements in relation to enforcement were in fact changed by the last Labour Government. What we did immediately following the appalling fire at Grenfell Tower was to ensure that all those involved—local authorities and others—worked with their fire authorities to inspect towers and look at the cladding. There are
issues about not just the cladding, because this is also about how it is affixed to buildings. Action was taken by local fire authorities in the areas where they thought that was necessary, which was why in Camden, for example, people had to leave their tower block while action was taken. My right hon. Friend the Housing Secretary has put in place a review of the regulations. It was urgently put in place, and action is being taken as a result of that review.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Wishart, calm yourself. You are supposed to be setting an example to some of your colleagues. You aspire to be a statesman, one century or another.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, I am tempted to say that the hon. Gentleman is a right example, but there we are.

It is a matter for the Scottish Government as to what they choose to do, but I urge them to ensure they are putting the safety and security of people who are travelling first when they make that decision.

Q12. [903966] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Can I ask the Prime Minister a question about a policy that she is responsible for? Over the last two months, this Government have butchered Glasgow’s jobcentre network. Will she look me in the eye and tell me that no more jobcentres in Glasgow are due for closure?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is perfectly right to ask me questions about things for which I am responsible, and I have the right, as I did previously, to comment on issues that we are taking up with the Scottish Government.

Mr Speaker: I say to the hon. Gentleman that I will give him the right to ask me questions about things for which I am responsible, and I have done so.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. What we are doing in relation to jobcentre services is ensuring that there will be no decrease in the level of services that jobcentres offer people in Scotland. In fact, we are going to increase the number of work coaches across the country, to provide more support to the people who need it. Those plans are designed to retain the skills and experience of the DWP workforce across the country and to ensure that we not just protect but enhance the service offered to people.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Will the Prime Minister tell the international aid sector that, despite the abuses that have come to light recently, this Government are committed to helping the most vulnerable and poorest people around the world, but the sector really does need to get its act in order?

The Prime Minister: This Government maintain their commitment to helping the most vulnerable people around the world, and we maintain our commitment to our international development budget, but we want to work with organisations that meet the high standards that we expect. The behaviour of Oxfam staff in Haiti was quite frankly horrific and far below those standards.

I am pleased to say that my right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary has taken immediate action by demanding assurances from all our charitable partners here and abroad about their safeguarding and protection policies by the end of the month. Next month, DFID and the Charity Commission will hold an urgent safeguarding summit, where they will bring together UK international development charities with regulators and experts, to look at the possibility of an accreditation scheme that can be used for aid workers and taken into the international arena later in the year.

It is absolutely crucial that we continue our support through aid for those who are most vulnerable, but they also deserve to be treated with the same high standards that we would expect to be treated ourselves.

Q13. [903967] Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent Mr Ali Baig was refused leave to remain because of a minor legitimate correction to his tax return, which the Home Office under paragraph 322(5) of the immigration rules has deemed a threat to national security. Today there is a protest outside against this Tory Government’s policies towards highly skilled migrants, so my constituent is clearly not alone. His home is in Glasgow. He has worked hard and contributed to society. Why does the Prime Minister want to force him out?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Lady that I am not going to comment on the individual case. The Home Office looks at the circumstances of individuals. There are rules—immigration rules—in place and the Home Office will make decisions accordingly.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The whole House will be well aware of the excellent work done by the Holocaust Educational Trust, particularly the brilliant Lessons from Auschwitz project. However, at the moment, the Polish constitutional court is considering a draft law that would make it illegal to refer to “Polish death camps” and to the role of Polish citizens during the holocaust. Will my right hon. Friend take this up with
her counterpart in Poland to ensure that families of victims and survivors’ words are heard—that history cannot be rewritten?

**The Prime Minister:** I say to my hon. Friend that I understand the Government have already raised this issue with the Poles. What we should be doing is ensuring that nobody forgets the holocaust—nobody forgets the horrific inhumanity to man that was shown through the actions taken by the Nazis in the holocaust. The Holocaust Educational Trust does very important work. The education centre and memorial that is going to be placed here at Westminster will be a long-standing memorial to people, and will also do the important job of educating people about the past to ensure that we never see such horrific crimes being committed again.

Q14. [903968] **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): How would the Prime Minister feel if someone pinched her car and it then cost her £200 to get it back? That is what is happening to hundreds of people. Why does she not allow the police to use proceeds of crime returns to recover legitimate costs and put an end to this state-sponsored secondary mugging of innocent victims?

**The Prime Minister:** I say to the hon. Gentleman that a lot of work has been done on what proceeds of crime can be spent on. He will have noted that the Home Secretary has heard the question he has raised, and I will ensure that the particular issue he has raised is looked into.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): Three months ago, I raised the case of a constituent distressed by the relationship between his 17-year-old daughter and her much older driving instructor. This week, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency announced that a consensual relationship between an approved driving instructor and a 16 or 17-year-old pupil would now be considered an exploitation of their position of trust, and any instructor involved will likely be struck off the approved driving instructor register. May I thank the Prime Minister for her response, and the DVSA for its action? Does she agree that this sets a strong example, and will she ask the Department for Education to consider adding driving instructors and other coaches to its list of those formally covered in law by a position of trust?

**The Prime Minister:** May I thank my hon. Friend for raising what was an appalling case? But from that, as he said, has come a change in attitude from the DVLA, which I hope will be of benefit to others who could have been put in that very difficult and appalling situation. I will certainly ask the Department for Education to look at the point he has raised.

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): In Sheffield, the council’s £11.1 million projected current overspend on children’s services is the highest in Yorkshire and the Humber and the second highest in England. This is clearly in correlation with the £350 million of cuts since 2010. What does the Prime Minister say to children who need these vital council services, but may not be able to access them because the Tories continue to cut council budgets so savagely?

**The Prime Minister:** As I pointed out earlier in response to other questions, we are ensuring, as we have done over the settlement period, that local authorities do have more money to deal with some of the particularly difficult issues that they have to deal with at a local level. We do want to see and ensure that children are given the best possible start in life, but it is completely wrong to suggest that decisions taken at local level are all the responsibility of this Government.

**Ross Thomson** (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is clear from academics, dog behaviourists, charities and trainers that electrocuting dogs does not help to train them, but risks creating more detrimental long-term consequences for their welfare. I thank all colleagues who came along to my event yesterday to sign up to the pledge to ban shock collars. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as dogs are man’s best friend, it is time we showed some of that loyalty and friendship in return by banning the use, distribution and sale of these barbaric devices?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. I know he has been campaigning long and hard on it. We made it clear in the updated statutory code of practice for the welfare of dogs that positive training should be used and that any training that involves pain, injury or distress would breach the Animal Welfare Act 2006. I understand that my hon. Friend will be meeting the Environment Secretary to discuss the matter further.

**Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): The deputy president of the National Farmers Union said that losing full access to the European single market could be absolutely disastrous for British agriculture. Does the Prime Minister agree with her?

**The Prime Minister:** My position remains exactly as it has always been. We are going to negotiate a new economic partnership with the European Union. I assure the hon. Lady that the interests of agriculture will be one of the considerations we take into account when we make sure that we are still able to have a good trade arrangement with the European Union, as well as improved trade arrangements with the rest of the world.

**Ruth Cadbury:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It relates to Prime Minister’s questions.

**Mr Speaker:** I will give the hon. Lady the benefit of the doubt. Points of order are supposed to come after statements. She says it appertains to the exchanges we have just had. I hope it does and that it is not just a prolongation of the argument. Let us hear it.

**Ruth Cadbury:** Thank you so much, Mr Speaker. My question to the Prime Minister referred to the ruling of the High Court today. In the ruling handed down in the High Court this morning, Mr Justice Garnham declared the Government’s failure to require action from 45 local authorities with illegal levels of air pollution in their area to be unlawful. In her response, the Prime Minister—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Forgive me, but the words that immediately spring to mind in this context are “second bite of the cherry”. I am afraid a Member is entitled only to one bite of the cherry. If the hon. Lady feels
very aggrieved, she can always write to me about the matter. I am not sure I should exhort her to do so—doubtless a missive will be winging its way to me ere long— but I do not think we can detain the Chamber now. The hon. Lady had a good bash earlier and we will leave it there for the moment.
12.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement setting out the action the Government are taking to address public concerns regarding the safety of medicines and medical devices used by the NHS.

On Friday, I will host campaigners, clinicians and safety experts from across the world as part of the world patient safety, science and technology summit, which is being held for the first time outside the United States here in London. As part of that, we will release a landmark report on the extent of medication errors in modern healthcare systems, as well as the NHS’s plan to tackle them. Alongside those in the report, there are three areas of potential medication error that I wish to update the House on today where serious concerns have been raised by patients and their families.

The first is Primodos, a hormone-based pregnancy test, which is claimed to have led to miscarriages and birth defects during the 1960s and ’70s and was prescribed to more than 1.5 million women before it was withdrawn from use in 1978, partly due to more modern pregnancy tests becoming available. The second is sodium valproate, an effective anti-epilepsy drug, which has been definitively linked to autism and learning disabilities in children when taken during pregnancy. Campaigners have suggested up to 20,000 children may be affected. The third is vaginal mesh implants, often used in surgical interventions to address complications after childbirth, which have been linked to crippling, life-changing side effects.

Of course our first thoughts are with the individuals and families whose lives have been turned upside down by these issues. Many people have endured, and continue to endure, severe complications and tremendous pain, distress and ill health, alongside a strong sense that their concerns have not reached a satisfactory resolution. I pay particular tribute to those who have responded to legitimate concerns reported by patients, families and carers in a timely, open and compassionate way to resolve issues, and consistently as other voices in the system, so today patient voices are bought to the table as systematically and co-ordinated as possible and alongside them and responds in a rapid, open and compassionate way to resolve issues when these are raised. My view is that that did not happen in the way I would expect in these three cases.

To do better in the future, we need to ensure that patient voices are bought to the table as systematically and consistently as other voices in the system, so today I have asked Baroness Julia Cumberlege to conduct a review into what happened in each of these three cases, including whether the processes pursued to date have been sufficient and satisfactory, and to make recommendations on what should happen in future. She will assess, first, the robustness and speed of the processes followed by the relevant authorities and clinical bodies to ensure that appropriate processes were followed when safety concerns were raised; secondly, whether the regulators and NHS bodies did enough to engage with those affected to ensure their concerns were escalated and acted upon; thirdly, whether there has been sufficient co-ordination between relevant bodies and the groups raising concerns; and fourthly, whether we need an independent system to decide what further action may
be required either in these cases or in the future. This is because one of the judgments to be made is whether, when there has been widespread harm, there needs to be a fuller, or even statutory, public inquiry. Baroness Cumberlege will make recommendations on the right process to make sure that justice is done and to maintain public confidence that such decisions have been taken fairly.

Although I am deliberately leaving the terms of this model open for Baroness Cumberlege, I have asked that she consider how we strike the right balance on the criteria or threshold for a “legitimate concern”; how best to support patients where there might not be a scientific or legitimate concern, but they still have suffered harm; how we can be more open to the insights that close attention to patient experience can bring, including whether a patients’ champion could help to act as a point of contact for people or families raising legitimate concerns, ensuring that these are heard and responded to; and how any new entity interacts with existing bodies including NHS Resolution, the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch and the ombudsman. Recognising that this is an issue that many hon. Members have been concerned about, I have asked Baroness Cumberlege to meet relevant all-party parliamentary groups and campaign groups early in the review process.

We are rightly proud of the NHS and all it has achieved and will achieve in the future. Much of this has been built on the strong connections between scientific discovery and medical progress, but innovation requires safeguards, including a culture of learning to protect against the unintended consequences of new technologies and treatments, and a clear focus on the experience and treatment of patients and their families affected by these consequences. From Mid Staffs to Morecambe Bay to Southern Health, patients and their families have had to spend too much time and energy trying to access, lobby and influence NHS leaders and Ministers to get a hearing for their concerns. The stress and frustration of campaigning, sometimes in the face of closed ranks and a defensive system, has added insult to injury for too many families. We need to establish a fairer and quicker way to resolve such concerns when they arise in the future.

It must be said that our regulatory system is, in many ways, world-leading, but it too needs to adapt to a changing environment and to draw intelligently on multiple sources of feedback to protect the safety of patients. Today’s announcement will build a system that listens, hears and acts with speed, compassion and proportionality, strengthening the commitment to patient safety, which is at the heart of this Government’s and this House’s priorities for our health and care system. I commend this statement to the House.

12.58 pm

**Jonathan Ashworth** (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement. I welcome the tone of his remarks and generally welcome his commitment to a review of medical device safety, although I note that the 2017 Labour manifesto called for an inquiry into medical devices and product safety and regulation. Today’s announcement is an acknowledgement that there are major problems, going back decades, to do with safety and lack of proper scrutiny and research.

In debate and Committee, Members in all parts of the House have offered moving testimonies about the devastating impact of mesh, Primodos and sodium valproate on the lives of thousands of women and children in our constituencies. I wish to put on the record my thanks and tribute to all the campaigners and the MPs from across the House, but especially those who have worked so hard with the all-party groups, including my hon. Friends the Members for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) and for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who have all spent many years campaigning for justice on these issues.

We have heard how mesh implants have left women in permanent pain, unable to walk, unable to work. This is an ongoing public health scandal, and we hope the Government will do much more to support those who are affected. Mesh has been suspended in Scotland and banned in other countries around the world. I understand that mesh has been paused for use in cases of prolapse. Will the Secretary of State consider fully suspending mesh use while the review is carried out?

On Primodos, the Secretary of State indicated that the Department will drive forward and “accelerate” the recommendations of the expert working group, but does he accept that that report was met with concern on both sides of the House? Indeed, campaigners branded it a whitewash.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for including sodium valproate. My constituent, Emma Friedmann, took sodium valproate during and after her pregnancy, leaving her son, Andrew, with severe autism along with hearing and sight problems. Andrew, who is now 18, needs round-the-clock, full-time care. Emma, like thousands of others affected, was never fully informed of the risks of taking sodium valproate during pregnancy. Last year, a charity survey found that almost one fifth of women who are taking the drug still do not know the risks that the medicine can pose during pregnancy. I welcome the Government’s efforts to raise awareness of the dangers of sodium valproate, but will the Secretary of State tell us whether the review will look at the guideline for clinicians who prescribe it to women of childbearing age?

We offer the review our support, but note that it falls short of the calls for a full public inquiry, which campaigners have been demanding. Will the Secretary of State give the House an absolute reassurance that the review will gain access to medicine regulation files held in the National Archives, access to any valuable evidence cited in unsuccessful legal actions and access to documents and information held by pharmaceutical companies and that all such material will be made public?

Does the Secretary of State agree that those affected must have trust and confidence in the review? Who will the noble baroness report to, and who will provide the secretariat to the review? I say this with no discourtesy to the Department or the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, but does he agree that the review must be independent to avoid any sense of conflict of interest that has hampered previous inquiries? I understand the steer that he has given to the noble baroness on setting the terms of reference, but I press him to ensure that victims agree with the terms of reference to maintain trust and confidence in the review.
Is the Secretary of State now ruling out a full public inquiry, or is he saying to victims that they should wait for the review’s outcome? When can we expect it to report back to the House? More broadly, can he reassure us that the inquiry will have three separate strands that will look in depth at each issue to ensure that nothing gets watered down and lost?

In the broader context of Brexit, when profound uncertainty remains about medical and device regulation as we leave the European Medicines Agency, does the Secretary of State agree that the review must inform future regulatory mechanisms and take into account how we best co-operate with other national and international regulators post Brexit? What assurances can he offer the House that the medicines and devices that women use today—especially pregnant women—will not become the tragic and desperate scandals of the future?

On the treatment of the victims involved, the Secretary of State will know that many women have been denied access to legal aid to pursue compensation claims. Does he agree that women and children deserve full compensation and support? Is that not the Government’s responsibility? Will they establish a compensation fund, and what consideration has he given to compelling the pharmaceutical industry to support a compensation fund for those affected?

Finally, mesh, sodium valproate and Primodos have devastated the lives of hundreds of thousands of women and children. Is it not time that they were given a full apology? Surely, that is the very least they deserve.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his considered response and for its tone. Like him, I thank all the all-party groups who have worked incredibly hard to raise this incredibly difficult issue. Let me go through the points that he raised: he asked detailed questions, which I want to give a proper answer to.

When it comes to mesh, no EU country has banned its use. In my understanding, Australia and New Zealand have not introduced a full ban. We have taken very clear advice. We obviously have a responsibility to all patients, and the medical advice from the chief medical officer is clear that some women benefit from mesh, if it is appropriately used, so we are following that advice. However, the review will look at all the processes around mesh. We will publish NICE guidelines on persistent pain and ventral meshes—it is also important to say that meshes are used in men as well as women—and we absolutely have to get this right.

I fully accept the point that the hon. Gentleman made on the concerns of many patients and families about the findings of the expert working group. He will know that this is a very difficult, hotly contested area. We are not proposing to revisit the science, but we are giving Baroness Cumberlege full freedom to look at what the expert working group did and to come to her own views. We are not excluding her from looking at what happened, even though we think that it is important to accept throughout that we have to follow the science at every stage to get this absolutely right. We will be going forward with some important recommendations of the expert working group regardless, such as the yellow-card system.

One thing that is clear is that when people, whether clinicians or patients, have an immediate concern about a medicine, there is no easy way to raise that quickly. If women are raising these concerns all over the country, we need to find that out very quickly at the centre, so that we can take action more quickly than happened in this case. We will also be offering genetic testing to families who have suffered, or who think that they have suffered, as a result of Primodos.

On valproate, we will issue guidelines to clinicians. We also want to make sure that there is greater awareness among patients. We are changing the NICE guidelines and the labelling. When it comes to valproate, we want to push for this to be a contra-indication for women of childbearing age who are not taking effective contraception, because it is so important to get this right.

The hon. Gentleman made very important points about the public inquiry. We are asking Baroness Cumberlege to give us her considered view on the appropriate way forward in this case, and that, of course, has implications for the issue of compensation. What I would say is that we have a problem in our system, in that there is no proper process for deciding what next steps are appropriate. Is it an investigation by the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England, or do we need a full statutory public inquiry? We particularly want her to look at whether we should have an independent process to evaluate what happened. In my time, and in the hon. Gentleman’s time, Gentleman’s time, we have been approached by a lot of people who want public inquiries, but it should not simply be about the strength of lobbying. There needs to be a process, because there may be people who do not have a loud voice, who are equally worthy of a public inquiry, but who do not get considered in our system at that moment. That would not be right.

Baroness Cumberlege will report to Ministers, not to the MHRA, and there will be full consultation with the families affected by the three issues over the terms of reference. That is absolutely the right thing to do.

The hon. Gentleman made a final very important point about how we regain the trust of families deeply scarred by these issues. We can do it in two ways: first, by being open and transparent in everything we do in this process so that they can see we want to get to the bottom of it as much as they do; and secondly by recognising the fundamental issue that in the past when we have assessed these clinical medical safety issues the voice of patients has not been as strong as it should have been. We have to put that right, and I know that everyone in the NHS, as in the House, is committed to doing so.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and his ongoing focus on patient safety, which has added so much to the patient experience. I also welcome the fact that he is clearly representing the voice of patients when learning lessons. Many of those who, courageously, have come forward, including many of my own constituents, have been harmed in the private sector. Will he confirm that all patients, wherever they were treated, will be included within the review and that there will be a focus on clinical governance, not only in the NHS but in the private sector?
Mr Hunt: I can absolutely give that assurance. We are considering how to strengthen oversight, because a tragedy is a tragedy wherever it happens, and we should be demanding the highest standards of care throughout our healthcare system. We are particularly considering the issue of data sharing, because often clinicians operate in both the NHS and the private sector, and we want to make sure that we do not have two datasets but that we share data in a way that makes patients safer.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, although I am sure that some of the women affected by these medicines or medical devices will be sceptical and might wonder whether the Government have not just announced a review of reviews, especially given the outrage among patients and the wider public over the review process and its outcomes in the past.

Medicines safety and licensing are reserved matters, and although we welcome the fact that the Government are not just doing nothing, it is disappointing that the review will not really consider the scientific evidence on Primodos, valproate and surgical mesh. Given the recent shambles over the Primodos expert working group, everyone needs confidence that this will not turn into a Government whitewash. How can patients be assured of the chair’s independence? Who will take a final decision on who advises the chair? Will those affected and those who took part in the initial reviews be able to participate? I am sure the Secretary of State is aware that Professor Alison Britton is already leading an independent review in Scotland of vaginal mesh. Will he and his officials seek to take advice and soundings from her findings and expertise in this process? Finally, having as much information and background as possible on women’s experiences is extremely important in getting justice and improving patient safety, so does the Secretary of State think that setting up a mechanism within his Department to collate extensive qualitative research for patients would be useful?

Mr Hunt: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, he is being a little uncharitable in describing this as a “review of reviews”. We have announced immediate action in each of these three cases—it will happen right away and will be of huge significance in the use of valproate, help for families who think they have suffered as a result of Primodos and the use of mesh. A lot of things are happening right away. These are complex issues, however, and if we are to step back and look at the systemic failures we think have happened, it is important that we ask what changes are needed. That is why we need someone of Baroness Cumberlege’s experience; she has a huge track record of campaigning on women’s issues; she was a Minister at the Department of Health for five years; and she did the “Better Births” review for NHS England in 2015. She is hugely experienced and passionate about patient safety and making sure that the patient voice is heard.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I welcome the review and the announcement of Baroness Cumberlege as its lead. I am sure that the whole House will agree that she is, as the Secretary of State said, highly qualified and trusted. I pay tribute to the many hundreds of thousands of women who have suffered in silence and campaigned so effectively. As the Minister who surprised a few in announcing the Primodos working group, setting up the sodium valproate taskforce, with my right hon. Friend, and brokering the deal on the Saatchi Bill, I have seen the power of the in silico puffering words which so many women have had to live. He is absolutely right that for too long the medical establishment has tended to link arms and act very protectively when challenged, and we need to make sure that the patient voice is put right at the heart of this.

Will the Secretary of State agree with two points? First, does he agree that it is important that this does not become some legal witch hunt, but starts as a review of the evidence, the science and the clinical data in order to avoid future patient suffering? If it is couched in terms of legal liability, everyone will draw in and resist the sharing of evidence that is so key. Secondly, will he look at training? On mesh, the MHRA has licensed the device, but my understanding is that the problem is often with the training of clinicians in its installing. We need an intelligent healthcare system that uses everyday data to support patient safety.

Mr Hunt: I would like to put on the record my thanks to my hon. Friend for the work he did as a Minister in my Department that led to the setting up of the expert working group, which I think has taken this issue forward and which he championed. His experience of the life sciences industry was incredibly helpful. I take on board both his points. It is absolutely right that this needs to focus on patient safety and how we put in place processes that help people suffering now and avoid it happening in the future. His point about training is a very good one.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, although I know that some of the women who think they have suffered as a result of these medicines will have been a little disappointed with the announcement of a review of reviews. Will the Secretary of State agree with two points? First, does he agree that it is important that this does not become some legal witch hunt, but starts as a review of the evidence, the science and the clinical data in order to avoid future patient suffering? If it is couched in terms of legal liability, everyone will draw in and resist the sharing of evidence that is so key. Secondly, will he look at training? On mesh, the MHRA has licensed the device, but my understanding is that the problem is often with the training of clinicians in its installing. We need an intelligent healthcare system that uses everyday data to support patient safety.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I welcome the review of the yellow card process. The first responsibility of the doctor is always to do no harm, and every doctor, when making any prescribing decision, always balances the potential improvement in patient care with the known risks. Sometimes, as more drugs are given to more people, rarer side effects will come through, and the improvements in the yellow card system will mean that those are identified earlier.

My other point is about Roaccutane. It is a drug given to treat acne but is known to be exceptionally toxic in pregnancy. I remember from my time working in dermatology that to get a prescription women had to attend monthly and have a negative pregnancy test
before the next prescription was issued. I wonder whether that approach could be more widespread in the prescription of some of these drugs, which do provide some benefit but are known to be harmful.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend’s question demonstrates how useful it is to have people with medical experience in the House. To be honest, I am slightly overwhelmed by the detail in her question, but her broad point is absolutely right. The difficulty with the issues today is how much they affect women, particularly pregnant women. Through the review, we want to establish whether we are doing less well than we should on women’s health issues. Given that Baroness Cumberlege has done more campaigning on women’s health issues than pretty much anyone else in either House, I think she is the right person to take the review forward. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about strengthening the protections for pregnant women.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party group on oral hormone pregnancy tests, I am disappointed with the wording of today’s announcement. What happened with Primodos was a scandal similar to the Hillsborough, contaminated blood and sexual abuse scandals. Victims of Primodos and their families have waited 40 years for an answer to this grave historical injustice. It was a deliberate criminal cover-up by the statutory authorities of the day. The scientific evidence now shows a link between Primodos and deformities that was known to the drugs companies and our regulatory bodies 40 years ago. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the review—we want a full public inquiry—looks at the regulatory failures that took place 40 years ago? There was a systematic and deliberate cover-up, including the destruction of documents, by our health bodies as well as the drugs manufacturers. Primodos is, therefore, perhaps different from some of the other cases. We demand a proper inquiry and proper compensation and that the victims be put at the heart of the inquiry. They were completely ignored by the expert working group—that document was not worth the paper it was published on.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady and I may not agree on every part of my statement, but I thank her for her campaigning on this issue, and for the voice that she has given to thousands of women who believe that they have suffered badly as a result of Primodos. The things for which she has asked were not ruled out in the statement; in fact, what I have announced will create a process during which someone will look very carefully at the issue.

The hon. Lady has made some very serious allegations, and it is absolutely her right to do so as a Member of this House, but they differ from the conclusions reached by the expert working group. It is precisely because of that disagreement that we have asked Baroness Cumberlege to look carefully at the issue and form her own view of the right way forward. However, I assure the hon. Lady that regulatory failures are at the front of our minds, and we are absolutely determined to ensure that victims’ voices are heard.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the compassionate tone that he has struck today, and for taking account of the years for which many campaigners, such as Janet Williams and Emma Murphy, have tried to make their voices heard, on valproate in particular. If, following the review, various medicines or medical devices are found to be unsafe—or, indeed, to have been taken unsafely—will there be legal consequences for the regulators who should have acted differently?

Mr Hunt: The simple answer to that question is yes: there are legal consequences for regulators who have failed. In that instance, it would be the responsibility of the Government, or of the drugs companies who failed in their responsibility to inform patients of the dangers of taking drugs. The priority is to establish the facts. Some of those are clear now, but some are not, and that is why I think that the review will help us.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Constituents of mine have been affected by both sodium valproate and Primodos. The Secretary of State has already heard the dismay expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) at the outcome of the review by the expert working group, but may I ask him another specific question? What he has announced today will not give a great amount of satisfaction to people, and confidence that his Department will take notice of Baroness Cumberlege’s review will be reduced by a written response that I received yesterday which stated that the Department had no plans to fund any independent scientific research on hormone pregnancy tests. We know that Dr Vargesson produced a report last week. Will the Secretary of State ensure that Baroness Cumberlege looks very carefully at this particular issue?

Mr Hunt: I can give the hon. Gentleman an absolute assurance that she will do so. In the case of valproate it is very clear what the next steps should be, because there is no dispute over the science. When there is controversy over the science—and I appreciate how distressing that is for the families involved—the first thing we must do is establish the truth of the situation, and that is why we have given Baroness Cumberlege a free hand to look at the whole issue.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the statement, which is consistent with my right hon. Friend’s track record of driving the NHS to stop causing harm to patients. May I ask him to continue to focus on encouraging, requiring and supporting all healthcare professionals to make the shift from a defensive to a learning mindset, so that they listen and learn not just from NHS experience, but from patients as well?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend, who has huge experience in healthcare, is right to say that at the heart of dealing with these very complex issues is the need for us to be careful not to inadvertently encourage a culture of defensive medicine. If doctors feel unable to be open about mistakes that may have happened because they are worried about legal consequences, we will not benefit from the learning that is so incredibly important, and one of the purposes of the review is to ensure that we support that open learning culture.
Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): On behalf of my constituents whose families have suffered from the effects of Primodos, I thank the Secretary of State for taking a step in the right direction. He has announced that there will be another review with another remit. Can he reassure the House that one of the reviews will be able to investigate the cover-up over Primodos that we know has taken place for decades, and that if a crime has been committed, it will be dealt with?

Mr Hunt: I totally respect the right hon. Gentleman for airing his constituents’ concerns, but, as he will know from my answers to earlier questions, the difficulty in the case of Primodos—and this is incredibly distressing for the families involved—is that scientists do not agree about the issue, and as a result we do, unfortunately, find ourselves having to review what has happened. The review conducted by the expert working group was our first attempt. We are now giving Baroness Cumberlege a free hand to consider that and any other evidence that has come to light, and to draw her own conclusions.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Just an hour ago I met my constituent Carol Short and Emma Friedmann, a constituent of the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), to discuss the next stage of the valproate campaign, but because of the statement, that meeting was adjourned. I am happy that they are now in the Chamber, and I am sure that they are pleased to hear about the review.

Is it possible to ensure that GPs are giving out the excellent advice that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has put together? I am sorry to say that it seems that far too many are not, and there appear to be no regulatory sanctions to ensure that they do.

Mr Speaker: Order. I mean no discourtesy to the hon. Gentleman, but I hope that the people whom he mentioned are in fact in the Gallery rather than in the Chamber. That would be greatly reassuring to us, and quite possibly to them.

Mr Hunt: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance for which he has asked. We have announced today that we are improving the system of alerting both general practices and community pharmacies to ensure that the right advice is given and the right safeguards are in place, so that people who are pregnant or might become pregnant do not take a medicine that is very powerful and very effective in the right circumstances, but incredibly dangerous in the wrong ones.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s intention to look further at these very concerning issues, but I fear that his putting them all in one place means that he may not be giving sufficient attention to the Primodos issue, which is a scandal of very many years’ standing. I do not think that the recent report of the expert working group is the basis on which Baroness Cumberlege or anyone else should look further at the matter, because it was a complete whitewash, and the Secretary of State needs to acknowledge that. I think that if he were to do so, the people affected by Primodos over the last 40 years or more would feel much more confident that the process that he has described today might enable them to secure some resolution.

Mr Hunt: I understand why the hon. Lady has asked her question in the way that she has, but we set up the expert working group after a lot of very careful thought because we honestly wanted an answer. We are faced with circumstances in which scientists disagree, and in those circumstances it would not be right for me, as Secretary of State, to announce a different scientific view. I think that the right thing to do is to allow someone the time and space in which to look at the issues that the hon. Lady has raised, and that is what Baroness Cumberlege will do.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I have a constituent whose quality of life has been completely ruined by a surgical mesh implant. What reassurance can we have that the Cumberlege review will ensure that the voice of the patient is listened to much more quickly in future, so that when things go wrong, we limit the number of patients who suffer the type of harm that we have heard about this morning?

Mr Hunt: That is the right question to ask. I suggested in the statement that we might need a patients’ champion whose job would be to collect the experiences and views of patients who think that they may have suffered as a result of medicine or medical devices. However, we want Baroness Cumberlege to look at the issue in much more detail. The central point is that if we are to avoid the agonies experienced by my hon. Friend’s constituents, the patient’s voice needs to be as strong as the clinician’s in discussions about the efficacy of medicines or medical devices. That clearly has not happened to date, but I think that we are moving away from the paternalist system that has operated in the past, and the review will constitute a further step in that direction.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know the phrase “the patronising disposition of unaccountable power”, which applied in the Hillsborough families’ fight to get justice, and applies, it seems to me, in what has happened to the groups affected by today’s statement. Will the Secretary of State explain why Baroness Cumberlege’s report will not come straight to Parliament, so it can make a decision about how patients can get justice quicker than has happened in many cases such as the ones we are discussing today?

Mr Hunt: Those words about the patronising disposition of unaccountable power came from Bishop James Jones, who has made an extraordinary contribution as a voice for people whose voices have been ignored for too long. The House will have every opportunity to debate Baroness Cumberlege’s report. The Government will decide their actions and we will put them to the House, which will have every opportunity to listen, make suggestions for improvements, and to become involved at every stage of the process as we take this forward.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): With their incredibly moving stories, my constituents Karen, a victim of vaginal mesh, and Angie, with Primodos, will have listened intently
to what my right hon. Friend has said. May I underscore a point made by colleagues on both sides of the House? There are two key issues apart from the Cumberlege review. First, we must ensure that our medics, from medical school up, realise that they are not gods, because that is how many patients feel when they have to deal with them and their concerns are too easily dismissed. That needs to change from the bottom up. Second, my right hon. Friend made the point that this is an issue not just for the NHS but for private health care too. It involves patients living in all quarters of the United Kingdom. How will this learning, and the learning of the review, spread, while respecting the devolved Assemblies, in those regions where the health service is not under the control of my right hon. Friend?

Mr Hunt: Those are both important points. I will make one comment about the second one. The spreading of best practice is central. We must ensure that we do not just have a system where we have new NICE guidelines, but that we have confidence that it is being implemented across 30,000 GPs in 250 NHS trusts and so on, and I know Baroness Cumberlege will be thinking about that.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): For my constituents Wilma Ord and her daughter, Kirsteen, the wait for action on this issue and to get truth and justice has been almost unbearable. While I welcome the Secretary of State’s candour and tone, the actions outlined today are not enough, and I fear that the baroness, as welcome as she will be to this process, will be doing her job with one hand tied behind her back. The Secretary of State said in his statement that we are not revisiting the science, but then said that we needed to be led by science. Unless I misheard him, there is a contradiction. Will he confirm that the victims affected by all these issues will be at the heart of this, as will the science, because there is an important new study by Neil Vargesson that must be considered in this process in relation to Primodos?

Mr Hunt: I do not accept that there is a contradiction. We have to be open to the science and we have to be led by the science at every stage, and if there is new scientific evidence, we must absolutely take that on board. We must also always be led by patients in what we do, and that is exactly what I am announcing.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It was a pleasure to lead the debate in the House when we secured time from the Backbench Business Committee to discuss this. I really appreciate the tone adopted by the Secretary of State, and by the Prime Minister when I asked her earlier if there was good news. May I also pay tribute to the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who is sitting next to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, for the work that he did, because I gave him really quite a hard time during the debate?

However, there will be huge disappointment among the Primodos campaign team. The idea of being led by the science from the expert working group is fascinating, because it refuses to allow some forward as it had not been peer-reviewed, but then accepted a load of other evidence from the drug companies. On this review going back to the Department of Health and Social Care, it is implicated in this, in that these drugs were given out by GPs in surgeries without prescription, so that will give no confidence at all. I therefore think that the Baroneess will have both hands tied behind her back when doing her work.

Mr Hunt: I commend my right hon. Friend’s campaigning, but I am afraid I have to disagree with him. This is an important step forward; we are absolutely going to be led by the science—we have to be led by the science—and we are giving Baroness Cumberlege full rein to look at what the expert working group did, and to challenge it if she thinks fit.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The expert working group that the Government set up on Primodos changed its own terms of reference. It refused to look at all the scientific evidence and it did not have the confidence of the families affected. How will the Secretary of State’s proposals be any different?

Mr Hunt: This is something for Baroness Cumberlege to consider, but the broader point is right. We have for too long in each of these three cases, and in others as well, had processes that have not had the confidence of patients. That is why we are proposing today not just specific measures on each of the three issues, but a broader look at the regulatory structure to make sure that patients’ voices are louder and we avoid precisely what the hon. Lady said.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I welcome today’s announcement, which I am sure will also be welcomed by my constituent who had surgical mesh implanted in 2008 during a hysterectomy, and, significantly, without her knowledge or consent, which has led her to suffer severe distress and significant pain. When she raised that with her doctors, she was told it was all in her mind and she was imagining it, and she believes that she is still not being taken seriously 10 years later. Does the Secretary of State share my hope that the very existence of the review will encourage a more sympathetic response to people such as my constituent from the medical profession?

Mr Hunt: I very much hope so, and the crucial point that has come out from the contributions of Members in all parts of the House is that the processes we have had in place to date have not had the confidence of the families affected. That applies to a whole range of issues, and I believe medicine is changing fundamentally: people who are passionate about medical innovation and life sciences know that we need to have a very close partnership with patients in order to make proper advances. But we have not always got this right, and that is what I hope Baroness Cumberlege’s review will help us to do.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I welcome the audit on vaginal mesh and the promised register, but there are a couple of things I want to raise. One is support for victims. My constituent Angie was referred from Hull to Manchester to see somebody, and has now been told she will have to wait months before anybody can properly analyse what has happened to her, so can more resource be given to help the victims of vaginal mesh? Also, will the Secretary of State look into the licensing process on how these things
get into the market and are put out there for use by surgeons? Finally, we should not just look at training, because it is not just about the training for how we put these things in; I believe that the product itself is faulty.

Mr Hunt: We will certainly look at all those things, and the hon. Lady is absolutely right to draw attention to them. Licensing is one thing, but it is also important to ensure that proper information is available to clinicians and patients, because it appears from these cases that there are a number of drugs and devices that are safe but only in certain circumstances, and that knowledge might not have been properly disseminated. The database that the hon. Lady mentioned will help us to get that right.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I pay tribute to constituents of mine who have had surgical mesh implants—their campaign has been quite extraordinary and I am humbled by their work. The truth is that there is little prospect of any improvement in their condition. I welcome the statement and I recognise the issue around the ban and why that might not be possible, but will the Secretary of State assure this House and my constituents that there is little prospect of any improvement in their condition?

Mr Hunt: In this country, the compensation system works through the courts. There are times when the NHS is liable and there are times when the drugs companies are liable. I hope that Baroness Cumberlege’s work will take us closer to understanding where the liability actually lies, so that we can give relief to the families who have suffered for too long.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to my constituents, Emma Murphy and her colleague Janet Williams, for their courageous campaigning to highlight the risks presented by sodium valproate? As he and other hon. Members have acknowledged, victims are incredibly suspicious of the health establishment, and for very good reason. I ask him sincerely whether he is concerned by the fact that Baroness Cumberlege is the director of a company that specialises in advising pharmaceutical companies on how they can most effectively lobby Parliament. What will that do for victims who are already incredibly suspicious of us in this House and of the NHS establishment?

Mr Hunt: I understand the respectful tone in which the hon. Gentleman has asked this question. I do not think that anyone has a better track record than Baroness Cumberlege on campaigning for women’s health issues. In her career, she has shown an absolute willingness to take on the medical and scientific establishments when she thinks that that is the right thing to do, and she does so with a great deal of knowledge and a huge amount of passion, so I have every confidence that she will do a good job.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I welcome the statement today. The Secretary of State will be aware that we had a mesh review in Scotland, but unfortunately it quickly lost the confidence of patient groups, who branded it a whitewash after chapters were deleted and evidence was re-presented. Can he assure me that patient groups will not be treated as an inconvenience, and that the real-life personal experiences of these women who have been crippled by mesh implants will be taken fully into account and taken seriously?

Mr Hunt: I wish I could say to my hon. Friend that those people’s terrible suffering has been taken as seriously as it should have been, but the truth is that we have a system that has not treated patients’ concerns with the seriousness that it should have done. That is why we want to make the important changes that we are announcing today.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Forty-four years ago, my constituent Lesley Holmes took two Primodos tablets that had been handed to her by her trusted GP, to check whether she was pregnant. She wasn’t, but the consequences for her son have been devastating. With the expert working group’s report having been stripped of its credibility, Lesley is still seeking answers and recognition of her family’s plight. The Secretary of State appears to agree that we need to recognise that...
fact and provide the answers, but how long is this going
to take? How is he going to ensure that the outcome is
actually credible this time?

Mr Hunt: All I can say is that we completely understand
those concerns and the despair that many people feel
about this issue, but it is difficult to resolve it quickly
when there is disagreement among the scientists. What
we are trying to do today is to create a process to resolve
that disagreement, and that is what I very much hope
will happen.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I welcome
the announcement of this much needed safety review.
All UK citizens should be confident that the most
rigorous safety standards are in place. Can my right
hon. Friend confirm that the review will not have an
impact on initiatives such as the accelerated access
review and the cancer drug fund, which have fast-tracked
access to much needed drugs and treatments?

Mr Hunt: I can confirm that, although it is also
important to say that if we discover changes in procedures
that will improve the safety of medicine use or medical
device use, the people who put those new drugs on the
market would want to benefit from any changes in
regulatory processes, but what we would not want to do
is reduce the speed.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I welcome
the Secretary of State’s statement. I have met and been
contacted by many women in my constituency who
continue to suffer excruciating pain and serious detrimental
outcomes as a result of surgical mesh implants. I welcome
these initiatives, but I suggest that there would be huge
value in some of them, such as the database, being
established at a UK-wide level. What discussions have
he and his Department had, or do they intend to have,
with the devolved regions to ensure that this could take
place at a UK-wide level?

Mr Hunt: Our approach on safety issues is that we are
happy to do anything on a UK-wide basis if that is what
the devolved Administrations want, because we do not
see any benefit in not sharing data. If the willingness is
there among the other Administrations, we would be
happy to play ball.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I
welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement of a
review of these three important medical matters and his
securing the much respected Baroness Cumberlege to
lead it. I should like to focus on Primodos, which has
affected around 1.5 million women throughout the United
Kingdom. It has been a terrible long journey for those
affected around 1.5 million women throughout the United
Kingdom. It has been a terrible long journey for those
affected around 1.5 million women throughout the United
Lab): Campaigners
on Primodos will be hugely disappointed by the Secretary
of State’s statement and his failure to recognise the
concerns they have raised about the expert working
group. That aside, how many patients does he envisage
being involved in the review, and how does he believe
they will be best accessed to ensure that those
people who are quiet actually have their voices heard?

Mr Hunt: That is the entire purpose of the review.
Obviously, Baroness Cumberlege will want to involve
patients in the process right from the start, and I will
talk to her about that. I will also write to the hon. Lady
to spell out in detail the way in which the Baroness
intends to involve patients in the process.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of
State for his statement, which will be of comfort to
vaginal mesh implants victims in my constituency. It is
right that the review will be wide-ranging, but will he
confirm whether those who have been barred from
receiving compensation owing to the statute of limitations
under the Consumer Protections Act 1987 will be included?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Secretary of State
will be aware that many of the women who took Primodos
would not necessarily have known at the time that that
was what they were taking or what the consequences
were, and it is only later that they may have realised
what took place. How will they be brought into the review? If there is to be compensation at some point, what will the test be? It would be unfair for them to have to prove that they were victims of the drug.

Mr Hunt: I wish it was easy to give the hon. Gentleman a straightforward answer, but the truth is that there is much scientific disagreement about whether there is a causal link, which makes it difficult to give clear answers to his constituents and, indeed, to mine. I hope that the review will shed some clarity on the situation, because that is what many people want.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What advice has the Secretary of State sought from the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Royal College of Pathologists? What involvement will those bodies have in the review?

Mr Hunt: Baroness Cumberlege has honorary fellowships at the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Physicians, so she is well connected with all the organisations that the hon. Lady mentioned.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. As he indicated, our products are world leading, and China and the UK have come to an understanding on medical device regulation, which is great news. However, does the Secretary of State have any information about further such understandings to ensure that we can export our medical innovations throughout the world safely and with as little red tape as possible?

Mr Hunt: It is fair and important to say that our regulatory system is admired the world over because we do safety extremely well and take it extremely seriously, but that does not mean that we cannot improve it. The lesson of today is that patients’ voices have not been strong in that process, and that is what we need to change.

### Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Extension)

**Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)**

1.52 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about shared parental leave and pay for workers, including those that are self-employed; and for connected purposes.

I begin by paying tribute to those who have been campaigning for the provisions in this Bill, which I would not be presenting today were it not for their work and dedication in pushing shared parental leave for all on to the agenda. The campaigners include UK Music, Equity, Parental Pay Equality, Pregnant Then Screwed, the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union, Parents In Performing Arts, the Music Producers Guild, the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain, Raising Films, the GMB, the TUC and many more.

The self-employed are clustered not just around the creative industries, however; the whole world of work is changing. More and more people are classed as self-employed or as freelancers working in the gig economy, and 15% of British workers define themselves as freelance. Physios, cleaners, builders, beauty therapists, delivery drivers, journalists, engineers, Uber drivers, plumbers, painters and decorators—literally anyone can be self-employed. However, 9% of women and 16% of men are not eligible for shared parental pay because they are self-employed, and there are 24,000 self-employed mums claiming maternity allowance who would benefit from the Bill.

It is encouraging that the Government know the importance of shared parental leave—that was a positive and radical step introduced by the coalition Government in 2015. Sadly, not enough families are taking the opportunity, because although many employers have enhanced maternity schemes, such schemes do not exist for shared parental leave for most employees. That means that many families would be worse off if they signed up to a shared scheme, and keeping the family finances in the black is a priority for most.

It was therefore good last week to see the Government roll out their advertising campaign “Share the joy” to get more dads to take up their entitlement. That is a welcome push when only a disappointing 2% of employees take shared parental leave. Unfortunately, the problems around take-up will probably never be clearer than when the Minister responsible for shared parental leave, the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), revealed while doing a media round to promote the policy that, as a Minister, he was in fact not eligible for it. I do not mention that to embarrass him in any way; I simply cite it as an example of how the culture around shared leave needs to change. To do that, we need to give more people more choice, and we need parity between the traditionally employed and the self-employed. The Bill would achieve just that.

Self-employed mums who have given birth currently must take their statutory maternity allowance in one go. They cannot return to work for a month or two and then resume their allowance. My Bill would allow freelance partners to decide who receives the allowance so that a mum could take a block when she was ready or wanted
to re-enter the workplace, while the family still received a regular income from the maternity allowance. That would be a simple way of replicating shared parental leave for freelancers at no extra cost to the taxpayer. Such a move would send a strong message to the country not only that we understand the changing face of work, but that men and women are valued equally in the home and the workplace.

If the policy was extended to the self-employed and freelancers, I believe that there would be no problem with poor take-up. A survey conducted by Parental Pay Equality found that over 70% of freelancers or those with freelance partners would use the scheme if it was available to them. A change to our cultural norms cannot happen overnight, but the self-employed can blaze a trail, helping us to get to a place where it is assumed that partners can—and indeed should—shoulder a significant amount of the childcare. If the number of freelancers who would take up shared parental leave is significant, why are we holding back?

For those who are not au fait with the rules around parental leave for the self-employed, I should point out that under existing legislation, a self-employed mum is entitled to a maternity allowance of £140.98 a week for 39 weeks if they have paid class 2 national insurance for at least 13 of the 66 weeks before their baby is due. Maternity allowance is paid only to mums, but it is withdrawn if the freelance mum does any work beyond the statutory 10 “keeping in touch” days that she is allowed. For example, if a freelance hair stylist took a 14-day contract job that lasted for longer than 10 days, she would immediately lose her maternity allowance and would be unable to reapply. However, a hair stylist who is an employee on maternity leave can work freelance, so long as she does not break the terms of her employment contract, and still get her maternity pay. That is far from ideal, and self-employed women face a difficult Catch-22 situation: stay off work and keep the allowance for the full 39 weeks, or run the risk of taking a one-off job that might not result in regular money. That would be a stressful decision for anyone, let alone a sleep-deprived new mum.

When 95% of small businesses on the Not On The High Street website are run by women, we know that many families out there might benefit from sharing parental leave. Why is it so important that we do this now? This type of work—freelance; self-employed; contract-based—is on the rise. The Office for National Statistics states that at least 4.7 million people are employed in insecure, freelance or self-employed work, and the Government have stated their desire to tackle the problems that such employment can create: less security, fewer rights and often less pay than more conventional employment. Self-employment and the gig economy have recently been the subject of the Taylor review. After Matthew Taylor heard hours of submissions and many detailed recommendations, he conceded that the Government should address parental leave “where self-employed people lose out.”

This is our chance to get that on the agenda.

Freelance, self-employed or insecure work is not new. It has for decades been a feature of the creative industries, in which 44% of people are self-employed. I worked in the area for over 30 years and my partner still does. It can be tough to pay the bills. Working hours are flexible, with project-based employment, uncertainty, precariousness, and irregular and often unreliable payment. There is no nine-to-five working and little stability, and looking for work can take up nearly as much time as actually doing the job. Today, however, the working patterns and insecurities of the creative industries are not an anomaly; they are becoming the norm. The idea of starting a family—another mouth to feed and no guarantee of work—can be terrifying for any freelance couple. Obviously, money is tight for any new parent, but it is even more so for those in the gig economy or insecure work.

Employing 2 million people, the creative industries are, of course, a success story, but areas for improvement remain. More often than not, it is the woman who compromises on her career to bring up the family. She is the one who steps out of the industry because two freelancers just cannot make the finances work. Or, once back at work, she is the one who is expected to stay off with the children when they are ill, who goes part time to fit around school hours, or who is expected to dash home early when childcare falls through.

We only have to look at the recent BAFTA awards to see how bearing the bulk of childcare can affect career progression. Women still lag behind men when the gongs are being dished out, and the statistics back that up. According to research from Raising Films, 74% of creative workers surveyed have turned down work because they are a parent, while 22% said that their career had come to a halt or had stopped altogether once they had a child. All that talent, training and dedication is lost because there is not enough support for self-employed families with young children. We need to change the culture, and to do so we need to start right at the beginning, when the baby is born.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my speech—I know how much those on the Treasury Bench appreciate a good deal, so this is worth repeating—the Bill would come at no extra cost to the taxpayer. Maternity allowance is already paid to new mothers; this is a win-win for the Treasury. The Bill would also mean that men would have more chance to spend time with their babies, allowing women to pick up opportunities as they present themselves.

Although I believe that the maternity allowance should be increased, the Bill is not about that. It is simply about giving freelancers and the self-employed the right to share the current allowance.

This Bill is simple but significant. It would allow maternity allowance to be shared in blocks between parents who work as freelancers, replicating the way in which shared parental leave works for those in more conventional employment. The Bill is fair and progressive, and it would complement current Government policy, not disturb it. It would help to close the gender pay gap, proving to the world that Britain is serious. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Tracy Brabin, Mrs Maria Miller, Mr Edward Vaizey, Alison Thewliss, Caroline Lucas, Jo Swinson, Tom Watson, Kevin Brennan, Emma Reynolds, Luciana Berger, Rachel Reeves and Rebecca Long Bailey present the Bill.

Tracy Brabin accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time: to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May, and to be printed (Bill 167).
FINANCE BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 11 December 2017 (Finance (No. 2) Bill: Programme) be varied as follows:

1. Paragraphs (10) and (11) of the Order shall be omitted.

2. Proceedings on Consideration shall be taken in the order shown in the first column of the following Table.

3. Each part of the proceedings shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proceedings</th>
<th>Time for conclusion of proceedings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to the effect of the Bill on equality</td>
<td>Two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to the bank levy; new Clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to the effect of the Bill on tax avoidance or evasion</td>
<td>Three and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to stamp duty land tax; remaining new Clauses, new Schedules and amendments to Clauses and Schedules; remaining proceedings on Consideration</td>
<td>Five hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order</td>
</tr>
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4. Proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion five hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(Mel Stride.)

New Clause 9

EQUALITY IMPACT ANALYSES OF CERTAIN PROVISIONS OF THIS ACT

(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the equality impact of the provisions of this Act specified in subsection (3) in accordance with this section and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider—

(a) the impact of those provisions on households at different levels of income,

(b) the impact of those provisions on people with protected characteristics (within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010),

(c) the impact of those provisions on the Treasury’s compliance with the public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, and

(d) the impact of those provisions on equality in different parts of the United Kingdom and different regions of England.

(3) The provisions specified in this subsection are—

(a) income tax (in sections 1 and 3 to 6),

(b) employment (in sections 7 to 10),

(c) disguised remuneration (in sections 11 and 12 and Schedules 1 and 2),

(d) pension schemes (in section 13 and Schedule 3),

(e) settlements (in section 35 and Schedule 11),

(f) air passenger duty (in section 43),

(g) vehicle excise duty (in section 44), and

(h) tobacco products duty (in section 45).

(4) In this section—

“parts of the United Kingdom” means—

(a) England,

(b) Scotland,

(c) Wales, and

(d) Northern Ireland;

“regions of England” has the same meaning as that used by the Office for National Statistics.—

(Dawn Butler.)

This new clause requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to carry out and publish a review of the effects of certain provisions of the Bill on equality in relation to households with different levels of income, people with protected characteristics, the Treasury’s public sector equality duty and on a regional basis.

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.4 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time. New clause 9 stands in the name of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and other hon. Friends.

I thank the previous Minister for Women and Equalities, the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), for the equality impact assessment response sent to me just before Christmas. Her responses are normally quite upbeat. I found this response a little lacklustre, but it highlighted why we need to support new clause 9. Her letter highlights the weaknesses of “due regard” and goes on to make a somewhat puzzling statement:
“All Departments carefully consider the equality impacts of individual policy decisions taken on by those sharing protected characteristics in line with our legal obligations and our clear commitment to equality issues.”

Therein lies the problem: this Government have not shown a clear commitment to equality issues far from it. With 86% of the cuts falling on the shoulders of women, and with black, Asian and minority ethnic people and the disabled suffering more than any other group, I find it hard to understand why the Government try to proclaim that they are committed to equalities.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The hon. Lady says that the Government have not made a clear commitment. Does she not agree that compelling companies in our country to publish gender pay gap information—the first time any Government have done that—is a very clear signal that is already making real change for women working in those companies?

Dawn Butler: I agree that it is good to get companies to publish their pay gap information, but there are no teeth if companies fail to do so. That is a real problem that needs to be addressed. We need to tackle the gender pay gap, and there needs to be punishment for companies that fail to address the pay gap—that is an unfortunate failing in the Government’s plan.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Does the hon. Lady recognise that voluntary publication schemes—such as on participation, as demonstrated by the Crossrail project—show that companies will comply through social pressure? There is a brand equity question, so we do not need a hard punishment. Through brand equity and reputation, there will be punishment enough if companies fail to comply.

Dawn Butler: Again, the problem is that very few companies have actually published, and the deadline is quickly approaching.

The letter from the right hon. Member for Putney went on to say that the Treasury would complete a cumulative impact assessment. I have yet to receive confirmation of that cumulative impact assessment, so will the Minister confirm that it has been done and whether a copy will be placed in the Library?

I know that it is often difficult for the Government to hear the Opposition’s views, so I urge them to listen to the voices of Conservative Members, such as the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), the Chair of the Treasury Committee. The Committee is obviously a little perplexed by the lack of commitment to equality impact assessments. The Chancellor has complained about the type of data gathered, but when he was asked whether he had asked the Office for National Statistics about the gathering of that data, he replied that he had not. That does not exactly show a commitment to equality, does it?

The Treasury Committee went on to say:

“The Treasury should use ONS and HMRC data to produce and publish robust equalities impact assessments of future Budgets, including the individual tax and welfare measures contained within them. A deficiency of data in respect of some protected characteristics is not a reason for failing to produce an analysis in respect of others for which data is available. Nor should the risk of misinterpretation or methodological complexity preclude the publication of an Equalities Impact Assessment.”

In short, just do it.

The only reference in the Budget to identified gender impact is where it disproportionately affects men. What possible reason could there be for that? I understand that the Treasury Committee would welcome an explanation of the Government’s thinking, and so would we. It just does not make sense. The Chancellor alluded to the fact that Ministers see the equality impact assessments for their Departments. That makes me wonder: if Ministers see them, read them and give proper due regard to them, why would they implement the policies they do?

If the Government fail to support this new clause, there can be no public confidence in the Government’s commitment to protect and not punish people with protected characteristics. For the record, let me say that the nine protected characteristics are age; disability; gender reassignment; pregnancy; maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. I understand that the Prime Minister is a little pre-occupied and weak at the moment and that she is dealing with a serious ransom note, but I honestly believe she will not be pleased that her legacy will be the hindering of women and their life chances.

More children are homeless or living in temporary accommodation now than at any time since the 2007-08 financial crash. Shelter says that homelessness is a national scandal and estimates that 140 families become homeless every day. The estimate of rough sleeping shows an increase of 134%. Every day, we see and hear the damaging effects that this Government’s policies have had on people, especially those with protected characteristics. This Government are damaging, not protecting, vulnerable groups in our society. Even when the Government conduct an equality impact assessment, they seem to ignore it. Just two weeks ago, they released an equality impact assessment that revealed more bursaries will be axed—this is for about 1,000 nurses who enter the profession each year. The assessment revealed that the latest change risks discouraging women who are ethnic minority or from poorer backgrounds, but the Government went ahead and did this in any case.

We need a Prime Minister who cares enough to start laying foundations by which we can bring about true equality for women, diverse communities, LGBT+ communities and those with protected characteristics. A Labour Government led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) would do just that. A Labour Government’s success will be measured not by how they reduce inequality. The next Labour Government will ensure that we publish comprehensive equality impact assessments and conduct them before implementing policies. A Labour Government would have pre-legislative and post-legislative scrutiny to ascertain whether policies are making a situation better or worse. The Labour way will enable us to truly build an economy for the many and not the few. If the Government fail to support this very reasonable new clause, more people will question—

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

Dawn Butler: I am sorry, but I am just coming to the end of my speech. If the Government fail to support this very reasonable new clause, more and more people
will begin to question why this Government are so intent on harming and hindering women and those with protected characteristics, as opposed to helping them.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in the final day of debate on this Finance Bill. We have had a lot of debate during the past few weeks. The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), the Minister and I have spent quite a lot of time together in the Committee Room, on not only this Bill, but the customs Bill. It is good to be here again to talk about this. It is a great way to start talking about equalities, particularly in respect of this new clause put forward by the Labour Front-Bench team.

The new clause is incredibly important, because the way the Government and previous Governments at Westminster have done Budgets has not been particularly transparent and has not resulted in people knowing what the effects of all the policies will be. I have said before that this is a good new clause and I am delighted to support it on behalf of the Scottish National party. I wish to highlight a number of things in it and to make more general comments about transparency and the processes the Government use to create Budgets and make tax law. The new clause talks about various things, including an analysis of the impact on the different protected characteristics.

2.15 pm

Let me focus on just one of those characteristics, as the issue of age is incredibly important. A number of decisions the Government make on tax policy have a differential impact on people of different ages. We have spoken in this Chamber on a number of occasions about the generational divide that exists. We are seeing “generation rent”, with millennials and those who are younger facing a very different housing situation from those in generations that came before. Therefore, any tax changes that happen affect that group of people differently from how they affected those in the previous generation when they were the same age. It is important that any analysis undertaken by the Government considers the generational divide and examines the impact on not only that group of millennials and younger people, but people of state pension age. It must consider the impact on them of any changes to taxes that are coming through.

The hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) mentioned the issues relating to women, and it is clear that a major gender pay gap remains. I recognise that the Government have ensured that companies have to publish this information. That is really important, but the publications I have seen so far from companies have caused me even more concern than the situation we were previously in. One company recently produced a gender pay report that stated that men in the organisation were paid significantly more than women and that this was not an equal pay issue because the men were overwhelmingly doing higher-paid jobs. This was a travel company and men were the pilots whereas women tended to be the cabin crew; 95% of this company’s pilots were men and 80% of its cabin crew were women. That is still a major issue, because women are finding it very difficult to become pilots and men are not finding it that easy to become cabin crew either. There is a real issue to address. Even though I welcome the fact that these data have been published, this has highlighted more structural, institutional issues that need to be solved, as well as simply those relating to equal pay. Any impact analysis that the Government carry out needs to ensure that it takes into account all these things.

Let us look at some of the decisions the Government have taken previously, such as the changes made on the marriage allowance. I welcome the positive changes that are being made to the marriage allowance in the Bill, but the creation of the marriage allowance disproportionately has a negative impact on single female parents. That is still a major concern for the SNP. We still have real issues with the marriage allowance and do not think it has been properly thought through, because of the lack of fairness in that system.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a good point on the marriage allowance, as ever. Does she agree that it creates a significant inequality, in that I, as a married woman, suddenly get this advantage over an unmarried woman? That is an injustice and an unfairness in the tax system. The Government really should not be in the business of telling people that it is financially beneficial to get married.

**Kirsty Blackman:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that people should not feel that they should have to get into a marriage, a civil partnership or any kind of signing on a dotted line relationship, to get a tax break. People should have the choice on that. As I said, this allowance has a disproportionately positive effect on people who are married, particularly on men; it is women who tend to be disadvantaged because they cannot receive this allowance.

Turning to other things in the new clause, I have previously talked, particularly during consideration of the customs Bill, about the differential regional impacts that Brexit will have, particularly now that the leaked Government analysis shows that there will be significantly higher negative impact on areas in the north of England, for example, than in London and the south-east of England. Therefore, when the Government make policy they should be making sure they are trying to balance that out and to put in place policies that are more beneficial to those negatively impacted areas, to counterbalance the major negative effect that Brexit will have.

We need to provide the people in those areas, particularly those at the bottom of the pile, with a fairer system that is better for them. Were the Government to analyse that, we would be in a better position and could see more clearly what they thought the impact would be. Part of the problem is that the Government do not know the impact of some of these policies. They do not know what the differential impact will be because they have not looked at it. If they have all this analysis, it should be easy for them to publish it and to give it to Members, so that we can scrutinise it and make the best decisions.

**Luke Graham:** The hon. Lady talks about regional disparity; does she really think that the Scottish National party policy of increasing taxes in Scotland is a good way to narrow that disparity?
Kirsty Blackman: I have expressed particular concerns about those people in England who earn under £26,000 a year and will pay more tax than they will in Scotland and about whether the Government feel it is fair—

[Interruption.] I am sorry, Mr Speaker, but I am being shouted at from across the Chamber. Those people at the bottom of the pile who earn under £26,000 a year will pay more tax in England than they would in Scotland. That is not fair, because those people—

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kirsty Blackman: No thanks.

It is not fair because those are the people who most need Government support, especially given the changes to tax credits and the negative impacts we have seen, with disabled people losing £30 a week. This is a major issue for the most vulnerable people. The Conservatives shout about the fact that tax rates for those who earn a reasonable income will be slightly higher in Scotland than in England, but it is clear that they support a different system that does not involve as much fairness as the system that we are trying to support in Scotland.

On the process of Budget scrutiny and the general process of scrutiny of Finance Bills, I have previously expressed vociferously my concerns about the fact that Finance Bill Committees do not take evidence. It would be much better if they did, and if they did, I would like to see them take evidence from organisations such as the Women’s Budget Group that can talk about the gender disparity in some of the tax decisions that are made. But I honestly do not think that that is enough. It is not enough to have scrutiny after the fact. Despite the Government moving to one fiscal event in the year, which is a change that I welcome, there is not the level of consultation that there could be before tax measures are suggested and put in place—before the Chancellor stands up and reveals his Budget.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In a Westminster Hall debate this morning, I outlined the benefit that the European Community brought to my constituency through the funding of vital infrastructure projects. Of course, there is a revenue follow-on from that, because road improvements lead to people being able to get to hospital quicker and other things like that. We are grateful for that. Does the hon. Lady agree that, in respect of the Bill, it would have been helpful had some consideration been given to the effect of the reduction of that money and what that will mean for the UK Exchequer? Indeed, it would have been helpful to consider what that would mean in terms of helping the Scottish Government to replace that funding, as and when.

Kirsty Blackman: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point. I made the point earlier about regional differences and the impact of Brexit. It is important not only in relation to the GDP reduction that areas might see because they will not be able to trade as easily with EU countries, but in respect of the money that came from the EU and was used for things like infrastructure projects. It is important that the Government counter those reductions.

When the Chancellor stands up to give his spring statement, which we hope will be light on tax changes—that is what tax experts and the business community are looking for—and when he delivers his Budget, it is incredibly important that he has done as much consultation as possible beforehand. He should not only speak to business organisations and Conservative MPs, as I know he does, but open the net wider and consult in advance on any tax measures that he wishes to put in place. He should also take on board new clause 9, which would ensure that an impact analysis is carried out afterwards.

John Lamont: Can the hon. Lady explain the consultation that the Scottish Government undertook before they introduced higher taxes for Scottish taxpayers? Many of my constituents do not feel that it was fair and many businesses have expressed concerns. Despite the calls for consultation, the Scottish Government’s consultation before the introduction of their own plans for higher tax was not reflected in any changes.

Kirsty Blackman: Before the vote on the Scottish Government’s budget, they produced a paper on the rationale behind their proposed changes. They consulted each of the parties in the Scottish Parliament and asked them all to put forward their tax plans, so that they could be analysed. The consultation was first put forward in October or November—I am not entirely sure—and the vote is taking place today. That left a significant length of time between the production of the consultation documents and the first discussions and the actual vote in Parliament.

Here in Westminster, we have the Budget debate and then the votes on the Ways and Means resolutions. We have votes on proposals that are being put in place from that day. That is very different from the situation in the Scottish Parliament, where a length of time is allowed for consultation because the draft budget is produced. All the parties in the Scottish Parliament are welcome to produce an Opposition budget and they are welcome to take that to the Parliament to be voted on. Some of them have chosen to do that and some have not. I suggest that those that have not chosen to do that might be struggling to balance the books, or they might have just decided that ours is clearly the best option.

I do not wish to take up any more time. The call for equality assessments and for more transparency and information would be helpful not only for the Opposition, who scrutinise the Budget, but for the Ministers who take decisions. They would take better decisions if they could see all the impacts, particularly on people with protected characteristics.

Helen Whately: I wish to make a few brief comments, particularly as I was unable to intervene on the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). I was quite shocked by some of the accusations she made and by what I consider to be her somewhat unsubstantiated claims about a rather illusory bright future under a Corbyn Government. I felt that she somewhat ignored the legacy of the previous Labour Government, who failed to build homes, thereby contributing to the current housing challenge; who failed on jobs, leaving many thousands of families jobless when the Conservative Government took over; and who increased inequality in our society.
Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The number of home-owning households increased by 1 million under the Labour Government and has fallen under Conservative Governments. I thought it important to correct the record.

Mr Speaker: It may be important to correct the record and I know that the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) was led into that by the observations of the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately)—it is quite easy to elide into disorderly conduct—but it is important that we try to focus the exchanges on new clause 9, to which with laser-like intensity I know the hon. Member. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent will now turn.

Helen Whately: The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) made a different point from the one I made. My point stands because it was about the building of houses.

By contrast with the previous Labour Government, the current Government have made progress on the gender pay gap. This is the Government who are requiring companies to publish data on the gender pay gap. As we well know, as has been said this afternoon, transparency is a huge driver of change. We have seen that in many sectors, including a lot in the health sector, which is where I got most of my experience. This Government introduced and are raising the national living wage, which disproportionately benefits women; this Government have taken the lowest paid out of tax; this Government are making sure that for every £1 that the lowest-income households pay in tax, they benefit from £4-worth of public spending; and this Government have overseen a huge expansion in jobs so that millions more are in work.

On the point that the hon. Member for Brent Central made about children, it is significant that many more children are now in households in which somebody in the family is working; far fewer are in workless households. We know that work is key to getting out of poverty.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is making a great point about our record on job creation. Does she also recognise that it is this Government who have overseen the greatest expansion of women in work since records began?

2.30 pm

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We have put in place policies to help women. The extra free childcare for three-year-olds benefits both parents but, as women are often the main child carer, it particularly helps women who have an ambition to work.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recognise that, since the last Labour Government were in power, youth unemployment has been cut in half? That generates opportunities, the dignity of work, the chance to get on and the chance for women and children to achieve their best in society.

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend for making such an important point. This Government have given thousands of young people the opportunity to have a job. It was not that long ago that everyone was always talking about NEETs—the big debate was about all those young people not in education, employment or training. Those numbers have now shrunk phenomenally under this Government’s leadership.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady has mentioned the power of numbers to be able to track progress. Obviously, new clause 9 is about the power of numbers to be able to track progress in tackling inequality. If she thinks that those numbers were so important in the battle to ensure that we did not leave young people behind, why does she not think the same when it comes to women and ethnic minorities?

Helen Whately: I am not surprised by the hon. Lady’s intervention. The point is that there is a thorough impact analysis of the Budget. Where does it get us if we endlessly go around these things, again and again?

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): If we compare 2003 to 2006 under the Labour Government with 2013 to 2016, we will see that the number of women in business and entrepreneurship has grown by more than 40%. Does my hon. Friend agree that that shows the Government’s commitment to women in business?

Helen Whately: Another very well-informed point from a colleague about the great progress that women are making in the workplace with the support of this Government.

The headline point that I was keen to make is that this Government have a track record in reducing inequality. I am keen to ensure that we base what we say on the track record—the track record of improving the lives of people on the lowest incomes and reducing inequality.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is about not just incomes, but equality of opportunity and aspiration?

Helen Whately: I agree. We should not just look at the outcomes. The outcomes are a desired end but, in order to get to a better outcome, the key is to give people opportunities to make the most of their lives. In particular, we should help those who have a difficult start, or who find themselves in a difficult situation. They may need extra help to access the opportunities but, absolutely, opportunity is the key.

Rather than painting a picture that can mislead people into believing this illusion of a perfect world, we need to base claims on substantial policies. I know that it is controversial, but universal credit is making a difference in my constituency for people who want to work and who want to work more hours. I have heard many criticisms of the policy, but genuinely it is making a difference and giving people the opportunity to increase the work that they do. Improvements in the standard of education and the opportunities coming through thanks to the industrial strategy—these are that those numbers that will make life better for people. That is how we reduce inequalities and that is why I am delighted to support the Government throughout this Finance Bill.
Luke Graham: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the chance to speak on new clause 9 and more broadly.

As I said when I intervened on the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), I appreciate that we should look at the distribution and at the impacts of some of the Budget provisions. That is what the Treasury already does. At every budgetary event, it does look at the impact on distribution across the United Kingdom. ONS statistics also look at distribution and the impact across different households.

When we talk about making sure that we shine a light on these issues and target equality, for which I and many Members share the hon. Lady’s passion, we should recognise that this is the Government who put pressure on companies to produce these publications. Although there is not yet full compliance, I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury will continue to put pressure on the sector—I referred to this matter earlier—to follow other industry-leading programmes such as Crossrail, which use publication and peer review to add pressure and to show companies what best practice is in the UK and internationally.

Let me pick up on some broader points about the pay gap, particularly the gender pay gap. I hope that Opposition Members saw the recent study quoted in the Financial Times just a month ago—I would be happy to share it with them—which looked at male and female pay rates. Those rates were actually very equal up to around middle-to-senior manager level, after which there was a big gap. The biggest disparity, and where some of the most uneven gap appears, was at the very senior roles, as in chief executive officer and chief financial officer roles. One of the key drivers for that, as stated in that study, was women taking maternity leave. So we have already identified the pay gap problem, and we should be looking at policies to increase flexible working and to help women back into the workplace after taking maternity leave. I know that colleagues on the Front Bench have been looking into that and have reflected that in the Budget.

More broadly, let me pick up on some of the points made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) about tax and equality. Just to be clear—new clause 9 refers to every part of the United Kingdom—some of the tax increases that have just been made in Scotland are said to produce a much fairer society, but, to clarify this for the House, the tax changes mean that those on the lowest incomes in Scotland get £20 more a year—that is it. That is 38p a week. When Scottish National party Members stand in this House and lecture this Front Bench and this Government on being unfair, let us remember that the tax changes that the SNP has introduced bring in 38p a week, or £20 a year, and the tax changes that the Conservatives have introduced bring in £1,500 a year through the changes to the tax threshold. Let us leave the SNP to bicker on the sidelines while the Conservatives bring about truly transformational change.

I was also amazed by what the hon. Member for Aberdeen North said about the marriage allowance. I am glad that she was pulled up on it, because the party has been in the papers about the marriage allowance just this weekend. The Chancellor of the Exchequer of the UK Government had to stand up and guarantee to people living in Scotland that the Government will bridge the gap created in the marriage allowance by the tax changes that have been imposed by the SNP Administration in Holyrood. Yet again, it is the UK Exchequer that is having to stump up for SNP failures in Scotland.

When we talk about fairness, it is also important to recognise that it is this Budget that is increasing the block grants in Scotland in real terms. It was even recognised by the Finance Secretary, Derek Mackay, in the Scottish Parliament, that it is a real-terms increase. Therefore, on top of the £1,750 per head spending we get—or Union dividend we get—already, we are getting a further real-terms increase to spend on frontline services in Scotland.

I am conscious of the time, but one important area that impacts on equality issues is tax avoidance, which has been picked up in the Budget. I am talking not only about tax avoidance generally, but about the VAT provision. The Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a member, has been specifically interested in that. The provisions that have been included to target VAT avoidance, especially for international payment platforms and for international marketplaces, give the Exchequer a good opportunity to target those who are not currently paying VAT but who should. Hopefully, that will bring more money into UK coffers and allow us to close the equality gap further still.

Rachel Maclean: I appreciate that we are all concerned with driving equality across the country, but the Government clearly differ from the Opposition on how to achieve that. I am proud to be part of a Government who are one of the most progressive we have seen. Our record speaks for itself. It is not about slogans and words; it is about real progress and real change in people’s lives. That is what the Conservative party cares about. Labour Members would like us to introduce a review for every provision in the legislation. It is clear to Conservative Members that this already happens. The Treasury already publishes the impact analysis of these policies.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The simple fact is that the Treasury does produce the distributional analysis alongside the Budget. To the Chancellor’s credit, he brought back in after his predecessor had decided that it was not politically convenient. The Treasury does not, however, do a breakdown of the Budget’s impact along a whole range of protected characteristics defined by the Equality Act 2010. New clause 9 would address that. The Government do not currently do this analysis, but as Conservative Members seem to be saying that the Government do already do it, they will have no trouble voting for the new clause, will they?

Rachel Maclean: I return to the point that we are already publishing the analysis. The Treasury is working on looking at the impact of the policies across a whole range of levels.

My main argument is that we need to look at what the Government have already delivered. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), more women are in work under this Government. That is real change. Those women have been able to get into work because of the wide variety of policies that we have introduced including childcare, help to get into work and retraining at all times of life.
We have seen a massive change in income inequality, which, under this Government, is at its lowest level for many years. Since 2010, households across all income deciles have seen growth in their disposable income.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): This Budget increased the national living wage by 4.4%—well above the rate of inflation—which disproportionately assists people like me, from an ethnic minority background, who often find themselves in low-paying work. Does my hon. Friend agree that this a great testament to the Government’s work?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. As she says, the national living wage helps people from all sectors of society, including those with protected characteristics. Our record on these policies speaks for itself.

Stella Creasy: The hon. Lady is promoting the Government’s record. One reason why the Labour party wants to get explicit equality impact assessments—not the tax information and impact notes, which I think is what she has been told the Government do produce—is that the evidence is showing counter to what she suggests. For example, we know that the gender pay gap between women in their 20s and men in their 20s has actually started to grow under this Government. It is now five times what it was six years ago. I do not know where the hon. Gentleman from Scotland got his data. I got mine from the Office for National Statistics, if he wants to have a look. Can the hon. Lady account for that? Does she not understand that having the data—understanding where Government policy is either promoting or helping to deal with the situation—would help us all to make progress?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady is a passionate advocate for addressing the gender pay gap. I will come to the issues she raises shortly.

Alex Chalk: Is not it important to see the wood for the trees here? The wood, so to speak, is to show precisely the point that my hon. Friend has indicated—that women on lower wages now do not start paying income tax until they earn £11,500, instead of paying at £6,475 as they did under former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and they gain over £1,000 in the process. The suggestion that we need a whole load of impact assessments is rather given the lie to by the fact that a lot of data is already published by the Office for National Statistics. If the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) wishes to make her point about it in the House of Commons, she is able to do so.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend really reinforces my point, which is that it is about putting pounds in the pockets of people up and down the country. That is what this Government have done, informed by fairness from the day that we came into office.

Stella Creasy: The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), as ever, needs clarification. There is data that shows us that the gender pay gap is growing. We are asking for analyses of the impact of Government policy so that we can understand it. We are talking about two different things. I hope that clarifies, for him and for the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), why the new clause matters.

Rachel Maclean: I care passionately about addressing the gender pay gap. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for women in Parliament, which does cross-party work on this issue. There is a wider remit that Members on both side of the House take extremely seriously, especially in this—the Vote 100 year. The gender pay gap has been addressed by this progressive Conservative Government, who want to see real change in our country and who want to put an end to the situation mentioned by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). She was absolutely right to say that we have men in higher-paying roles and women in lower-paying roles. However, new clause 9 would not fix this situation, as it is a complex issue that requires a range of interventions and a range of changes across the board.

Luke Graham: The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) referred to me when she mentioned the figures. I was quoting a study referenced in the Financial Times that I would be happy to share. The study did not say that the gender pay gap was closing. It said that men and women up to a certain level of seniority earn pretty much the same amount in most sectors, and that it is the outliers at the senior C-level who skew the data and contribute to a lot of the pay gap. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady may shake her head, but she mentioned clarification of figures, asked where they were from and called out my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), so I wanted to make sure that she had pure clarification. I also want to make it very clear to her that I am the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire, not all of Scotland.

Rachel Maclean: It is clear that we all take this matter extremely seriously.

Earlier I intervened on the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who spoke from the Opposition Front Bench. She said that the Government have no teeth to act when companies do not publish the data. It is my understanding that the Government do have teeth to act. We have something called the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which can act when companies fail to publish the data. I urge Treasury Ministers to pay close attention to that.

From the work I have done in the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I am aware that a number of companies have published the data. That is great news because it is now in the public domain. The Conservative Government made that happen, not the Labour Government. Now many more companies are following suit, and it is making a big difference to the employees of those companies. The Equality and Human Rights Commission can issue a notice and require implementation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) said, this is a complex issue.

I draw Members’ attention to the work of the 30% Club, set up by Helen Morissrey, who got a load of business leaders together and urged them to take voluntary action to put women on boards. Although there was absolutely no legal right or Government mandate, she found that the business leaders were all worried about reputational damage, culture and their image with their employees, and she saw significant changes across the board. I was an employer before I came into this House,
so I know that addressing the issue is not simply a matter of passing laws in the Chamber or the Government carrying out a review. It is about a societal and cultural change. I am proud that our Government, led by our Prime Minister—the second female Conservative Prime Minister—are leading from the front on this issue, and that companies and businesses across the board are following suit.

The Government’s record speaks for itself. It is not just about slogans. It is about enacting policies that make a big difference. I worry that requiring analyses and placing additional burdens on the Treasury at this time—when it has a massive amount of priorities to deliver in order to make our tax system fairer and to achieve the progress and outcomes that we all want—would have the opposite effect. I have certainly seen for myself the danger of unintended consequences when we regulate and put more burdens on businesses.

I do not support new clause 9 and will not vote for it if there is a Division.

Stephen McPartland: It is a great pleasure to be called in this debate and to follow such wonderful speeches from my colleagues. I understand that the Treasury publishes the distributional analysis of the cumulative impact of the Government’s tax, welfare and public services.

I have never been shy about voting with the Opposition if I believe that they are right, but I do not believe they are right in this case. That is because the review that they are asking for, which focuses predominantly on households with different income levels, and issues around Treasury analysis, just provides more data and more analysis, and that is not going to help people on the lowest incomes or those from disadvantaged backgrounds to move forward in life. It seems to be very academic as opposed to actually helping people to push forward and to move forward in life. It seems to be very academic as opposed to actually helping people to push forward and achieve opportunities. For me, the real challenge in this country is inequality in opportunity and in life chances. At the moment, the best way of changing one’s life chances is still through getting a great education. I am proud of the Government’s record, with millions more children being educated in good or outstanding schools. We should all be proud of that on both sides of the House.

As I say, I am not shy about voting with the Opposition if I believe they are right. I have campaigned on—

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that in Hertfordshire we have seen a lot of investment in the schools sector, which is helping to achieve the sort of results that he is talking about, with, for example, Highfield School in my constituency being completely rebuilt recently?

Stephen McPartland: I do agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. I have another colleague from Hertfordshire here as well—my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami). We have seen massive investment in our area. I am very proud of the number of primary schools that have been expanded and rebuilt in my constituency. A couple of secondary schools have also been rebuilt, creating great opportunities for the pupils. I am also very proud that all the primary schools in my constituency are rated “good” or “outstanding”. It is probably one of the few constituencies in the country where that is the case. Four of my six secondary schools are good, and the other two we are currently dealing with. I hope that by the time of the next election I will be one of the few Members of Parliament where every single child in my constituency will be in a good or outstanding school.

I do not believe that new clause 9 provides equality of opportunity and equality of aspiration. It will do nothing to help people in my constituency from disadvantaged—

Stella Creasy: We are all concerned to see good schools, I think. Does the hon. Gentleman recall a former Prime Minister who argued that sunlight was the best form of disinfectant? Having the numbers to track why, disproportionately, young men from black and ethnic minority backgrounds do worse in our schools, for example, and whether Government policies are influencing that, or whether their parents’ income might be an issue, would help him to understand how he gets those better schools.

Stephen McPartland: The hon. Lady and I agree on a lot of things and disagree on others. We have debated issues across this Chamber and in Committee Rooms. I do not think that figures will help those children. Figures are just retrospective and talk about what is possibly happening.

Dawn Butler: I want to clarify something. Equality impact assessment is part of the public sector equality duty. It looks at the implementation of policies, assesses them, and sees whether they have helped or hindered progress. That is all that equality impact assessment does. It is a good thing. It is not an extra burden; it makes for good decision making.

Stephen McPartland: My difference of opinion with the Opposition is that I think that a good teacher probably makes a much bigger difference to a child’s education and chances in life than an impact assessment and something from the Treasury. With regard to forecasts from the Treasury and economists, stuff that we have seen over the past couple of years, and the nearly eight years I have been a Member of Parliament, shows that in reality those figures never seem to be right.

This is about equality of opportunity and equality of aspiration. I would like to talk about universal credit. I campaigned on some of the issues on universal credit. I believe that universal credit, as a product, is the right thing to do. It was supported by both parties in the sense of stopping the cliff edge for people who could not take on an extra hour or two of work because they lost all their benefit. The idea behind universal credit was that the benefit would be reduced over a certain period. I know that there are still live issues with the Treasury over the size of the take. I hope that the Minister is taking note of that, because I continue to raise it with the Chancellor. I think that the withdrawal rate is still too high.

Universal credit is doing more than new clause 9 would do to help people’s life chances—more than a document saying what has happened and people’s opinions of what could or could not have hindered the situation.
Dawn Butler: It is good governance to have a look at the impact of one’s policies on society.

Stephen McPartland: The hon. Lady makes a very good point, but I cannot support the new clause because it will not do anything to help people practically. It will just allow academics and economists to argue over moot points, whereas I am interested in actually helping people from disadvantaged backgrounds who want the opportunity to go on and aspire to achieve and to be anything they want to be. It is very sad, in this day and age, that we are discussing the fact that we need to identify whether certain sections of society need more support than others. We should be aiming to get to a society—

Anneliese Dodds: Given that, for example, over 80% of the social security cuts enacted by Conservative Governments have fallen on the shoulders of women, would it not have been helpful for those women, and indeed for us as decision makers, to know about that before the decisions to implement them were taken?

Stephen McPartland: The hon. Lady makes a very earnest point, but I cannot accept those figures.

A huge amount of money has gone into social care. At the moment, there are people in my constituency on fixed and low incomes who are very disappointed about the 3% that is going to be levied on their council tax for social care, because that will have a negative impact on their income, although it helps other sections of society and is the right thing to do. This new clause is about academics and economists as opposed to helping real people on the ground on a day-to-day basis. Some Labour Members are shaking their heads, but they got involved in politics for the same reason that I did, which is to help people to get on in life and achieve the best that they can. That is why I am a Conservative and why most people in this Chamber are Conservatives.

Returning briefly to the welfare system, as that is my main concern, whatever decision we take, we need to pay attention to the people who are involved, and I do not think that we should do that. We need to understand and make the decisions that we think will help people to get on in life and provide a welfare system that is a safety net for those who need it in times of difficulty.

Bim Afolami: My hon. Friend is making, as I think everybody knows, a very powerful speech. Does he agree that new clause 9 is indicative of the fundamental difference between Labour Members and Conservative Members? We care about action and doing things and improving people's lives; they want more analysis.

Stephen McPartland: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point. We can see why he was selected to be the Member of Parliament for Hitchin and Harpenden. He stands up for his constituency incredibly well, as does my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald). I am proud that we have three Hertfordshire MPs who are speaking in this debate because we are interested in helping people to get on in life. As a result, we have incredibly low unemployment in our areas.

Dawn Butler: The hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) is absolutely right: this new clause does highlight the difference between the Government and the Opposition. The Government are intent on taking actions, regardless of whether they help, hinder or hurt people, whereas Labour Members want to ensure that we have policies that help society.

Stephen McPartland: The hon. Lady makes a very powerful point that I respect, but I assure her that I only vote for policy that I believe will help people, and if I do not believe that it will help people, I do not vote for it. I have voted against the Government for that reason. I have a record of doing that and will continue to do so.

3 pm

Sir Oliver Heald: I am sure my hon. Friend agrees, as many would, that the Treasury produces excellent research documents, and research is an important thing, but are these further demands for research not indicative of the difference between the parties, which is that they are the researchers, and we are the doers?

Stephen McPartland: I could never disagree with my right hon. and learned Friend. He always makes a powerful point.

One of the biggest challenges in society is intergenerational fairness. I do not think that new clause 9 captures some of the issues we face as a society and the challenges facing different generations. There are some people living in large houses, paying high council tax rates and on very low fixed incomes. There are young people who may be considered quite affluent but still cannot afford to purchase a property in their part of the country. In a different part of the country, they could easily afford to purchase a property but may not be able to get a job, so cannot get a mortgage. Intergenerational fairness is incredibly important, and the Government have tried to spread wealth throughout the country through the northern powerhouse.

I think that the Conservative Government have tried very hard. They have not always got it right, and I have voted against them when I believed they have got it wrong, but they have tried consistently to help people get on in life and provide a welfare system that is a safety net for those who need it in times of difficulty.

In this country, education is still the best way out of poverty and the best opportunity people have to change their life chances. I am proud of what the Government have done to ensure that millions more children are being taught in good and outstanding schools. When it comes to the economy, we have record rates of employment, with people out there earning, paying tax and contributing to society.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I have listened to him for some time. He seems to be making quite a lengthy speech; I do not know if that is just a thing that is happening on the Government Benches at the moment. He talks about equality and people getting on in life. I respect the fact that he has rebelled against the Government when he sees fit. He spoke about the importance of a good education and people coming out of school and university, but does he share my concern that under-25s are not included in the national living wage? What does he think about that?
Stephen McPartland: From my point of view, there are geographic issues with the national living wage. For instance, it is much more expensive to live in Hertfordshire. One shocking challenge we have in Hertfordshire—I imagine a lot of people in the rest of the country will not understand—is that my constituency is 19 minutes from King’s Cross, and as a result, we lose a lot of our young people to London. When I became a Member of Parliament, there were fewer than 200 apprentices a year starting work in Stevenage. We now have nearly 1,000 apprentices a year starting work in Stevenage. That was the only way of holding on to our young people.

On new clause 9 and distributional analysis of the cumulative impact, if a young person in Stevenage becomes an apprentice, the employer pays for them to get a level 4 degree. They will be earning £25,000 a year and not getting into debt in university. It is geographic.

David Linden: I declare an interest: I began my career as a modern apprentice. The reality is that under UK law at the moment, apprentices can still be paid as little as £3.50 per hour. How does that fit with building a country that works for everyone?

Stephen McPartland: In Hertfordshire, £3.50 an hour would not be acceptable. In Hertfordshire, employers have to pay far more than that to attract a young person, otherwise they just will not get them. That is the reality. I think I have the highest unemployment rate in Hertfordshire, at 1.6%.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I think it is quite important that the hon. Gentleman returns to the substance of the debate—new clause 9. Just mentioning it every now and then does not do the trick.

Stephen McPartland: You are very kind, Madam Deputy Speaker. I obviously had no intention of misleading you in trying to mention it now and again. New clause 9 and the Treasury publishing a distributional analysis of the cumulative impact of Government’s tax, welfare and public service spending is quite a wide-ranging topic. I was trying to make the point that I do not support new clause 9 because it seems academic, as opposed to helping people from different backgrounds to achieve their life chances. On that note, I shall conclude.

Wes Streeting: The speeches from Conservative Members have been so rousing that I have been moved to speak to take on the sheer absurdity of the arguments we have heard this afternoon. Member after Member has told us that they oppose new clause 9 because the Government already do this. If the Government already do this, why do they not support new clause 9?

The fact is that the Government do not already do this. What the Government do is publish an impact assessment with a distributional analysis of Budget measures by households depending on income. That measure was introduced by a previous Chancellor, until the current Chancellor’s predecessor decided it was politically inconvenient and got rid of it. The present Chancellor, to his credit, decided to bring it back. That assessment is interesting and useful. It informs Ministers when they are making decisions, but it does not cover the measures that new clause 9 addresses.

The fact is that the Government’s Budget and the Finance Bill are a reflection of their political priorities and tell the country about the problems the Government want to address and how they intend to do so through sufficient provision of resources. The simple fact is that if the Government made an equality impact assessment of their Budget measures, we may not be in a position where women in their 50s are being clobbered by changes to their state pension age at a time in their life when they have little time or opportunity to address it.

As a result of the Government’s refusal to listen to argument, evidence and reason, I see constituents in my surgery on a Friday afternoon—women in their 50s—who tell me that they have lost their job and are not able to access their pension when they expected. They had planned for retirement, and as a result, they can no longer make ends meet. There is nothing they can do about it at that stage. Had the Government considered the evidence, they might have made a different decision.

Had the Government assessed the equality impact of their Budget, we might not be in a position where disabled people have been consistently and repeatedly clobbered by changes to welfare and other areas of public policy. If, as local authorities do, the Government looked at the equality impact of their decision, they might seek to take steps to mitigate the impact on disabled people. Instead, nationally and locally, disabled people have too often had the books balanced on their backs, which is totally unjustifiable.

If the Government looked at the impact of their Budget measures on black and minority ethnic people, they might well take a different approach to the provision of resources in education to address the imbalances. They might also find, through analysis and research—words that have become anathema to this Government in their approach to public policy making—some surprises, such as the fact that detrimental changes to small businesses have a disproportionate impact on BME communities. They may choose to do something about it, or they may not, but at least their policy making would be better informed.

In the debate on this Bill, someone has to stand up and make the case for reasoned, evidence-based public policy making. It is a total disgrace that in the democratic discourse of this country, we now see the trashing of experts. We are warned that if we adopt new clause 9, academics may debate it—God forbid that people with some degree of expertise should debate the laws that we pass, because goodness knows it does not happen in this Chamber often enough. What is it about expertise and data that the Government are so afraid of? What is it about information that they find so terrifying?

James Cleverly (Brantree) (Con) rose—

Wes Streeting: Perhaps the hon. Member for Brantree will tell us. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

James Cleverly: I am curious. The hon. Gentleman expresses his desire for experts to have a role in the production of Finance Bills. Does he therefore not regard Treasury officials as experts?

Wes Streeting: Unlike Conservative Members, I have high regard for Treasury officials, and I do not trash the data produced by civil servants in the way that Ministers
of the Crown do. I think civil servants are a very good example of experts, and I would like the expertise of the Treasury and the civil service to be drawn upon to produce exactly the kind of equality impact assessment that Labour is calling for in new clause 9.

It is because I have faith in civil servants’ insight and ability to gather and garner evidence to inform Ministers that I would like to see a more evidence-based approach to public policy making. If we had such an approach, we would undoubtedly have a better quality of government—and good government we need that, when we look at the current state of things. We would also have a better quality of debate in the House about what our priorities are, the challenges facing the country and how to tackle them.

Luke Graham: The hon. Gentleman makes a big play of analysis. Can he inform the House of the analysis that Labour has undertaken of the distributional impact of £170 billion of extra borrowing and the interest payments on our communities?

Wes Streeting: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention because he makes exactly the point I have made since the general election. We put forward policies in our manifesto—by the way, they proved immensely popular across the country and led to a result that a lot of people were not expecting—and I think we should do a distributional analysis of such policies across the board to make sure that resources are properly targeted where they are needed.

In conclusion, we should not fear such information and evidence, which would lead to better-informed government. The greatest tragedy of this Prime Minister is not the fact that she is being held hostage by the hard Brexiteers on the right of her party; it is that she has not delivered on a single one of the sentiments in the fine words she said on the steps of Downing Street about creating a more equal society and tackling injustices that are still burning injustices even in one of the richest economies in the world in the 21st century. Sentiments are all well and good, but we need policies that are backed up by evidence and reason, and we need the ability genuinely to tackle the problems that the Prime Minister set out so long ago on the steps of No. 10, but which I fear she will never be able to implement before they boot her out next year.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Before I plunge into new clause 9, as indeed I will at some length, may I concur wholeheartedly with the statement made by the hon. Member for Ilford North (Luke Graham)? He makes a big play of analysis. Can he inform the House of the analysis that Labour has undertaken of the distributional impact of £170 billion of extra borrowing and the interest payments on our communities?

I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention because he makes exactly the point that I have made since the general election. We put forward policies in our manifesto—by the way, they proved immensely popular across the country and led to a result that a lot of people were not expecting—and I think we should do a distributional analysis of such policies across the board to make sure that resources are properly targeted where they are needed.

In conclusion, we should not fear such information and evidence, which would lead to better-informed government. The greatest tragedy of this Prime Minister is not the fact that she is being held hostage by the hard Brexiteers on the right of her party; it is that she has not delivered on a single one of the sentiments in the fine words she said on the steps of Downing Street about creating a more equal society and tackling injustices that are still burning injustices even in one of the richest economies in the world in the 21st century. Sentiments are all well and good, but we need policies that are backed up by evidence and reason, and we need the ability genuinely to tackle the problems that the Prime Minister set out so long ago on the steps of No. 10, but which I fear she will never be able to implement before they boot her out next year.

Mrs Badenoch: Does the Minister agree that it would be extremely difficult to generate. I would not go as far as my hon. Friend in suggesting that this is a Machiavellian
plan to gum up the works of Government, but I am sure some Opposition Members might be pleased to see that happen. I take the new clause in the spirit of the wording in front of me.

Dawn Butler: I just want to help the Minister a bit. The Women’s Budget Group, the Runnymede Trust and lots of other organisations, as well as the ONS and HMRC, accumulate the data that would be needed, so the data necessary to carry out equality impact assessments are available. In fact, the Treasury does some assessments anyway.

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady is suggesting that one particular set of analyses is an ideal set to present, and can be seen as in no way misleading, but entirely robust and entirely objective. If we are to reach such a quality of data, we will have to achieve certain specific aims, and one of the aims is to deal with the fact that a lot of the analysis to which she is referring is very selective—it does not look at the entire picture. For example, some of the analysis reflecting changes in income tax may show a benefit for one sex over another, but it may not take into account the impact of increased spending on childcare.

Anneliese Dodds: Will the Minister give way?

Mel Stride: I will make a final point before I give way to the hon. Lady.

A lot of these analyses simply look at the static situation, without taking into account the fact that the measures we are bringing forward will in themselves have a dynamic effect on the economy—for example, by driving up employment. Several Members have spoken very eloquently about the record level of female employment at the moment. That is benefiting women, but the interaction of our policies with that benefit would not be reflected in such an analysis. I have already mentioned that a lot of the information being sought is very difficult to verify and very difficult to obtain, particularly where it pertains to protected characteristics, such as sexuality, gender reassignment and pregnancy. It is very hard to identify those groups and the way in which they are affected, particularly in terms of all the taxes in new clause 9. I will come on to them in a moment—that the Opposition want us to address.

Anneliese Dodds rose—

Mel Stride: I will make a final point before I give way to the hon. Lady. It has been a long time since we have had a debate on this Bill. The point I am making is that this area is not a black box. The Treasury already undertakes and publishes research. It is my understanding that more than 2,500 Treasury papers have been published, so it is really a question, is it not, of where we draw the line? If a piece of research is proving very difficult, and would be very resource-intensive and so on, that will obviously make it less likely to be done than if it is a more straightforward piece.

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to the Minister for his generosity in giving way, and for his kind words. I want briefly to mention that the Department for Work and Pensions does produce this kind of modelling for social security changes, which may be similarly complex in looking at the interactions of different elements, so why does the Treasury take a different approach? In relation to that, would not the assumptions be spelled out, so that any ambiguity could be made clear?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but I bring her back to new clause 9. Whatever the DWP happens to be doing, whether it is right or wrong or whether it works, what we are facing here today and making a decision on is new clause 9. As I am working through new clause 9, I am arguing that it is not a practical way to seek to achieve that which the Opposition, quite genuinely and sincerely, are attempting to achieve.

Sir Oliver Heald: I wonder whether my right hon. Friend would like to say a word about the extent of research the Treasury already undertakes and publishes. It is my understanding that more than 2,500 Treasury papers have been published, so it is really a question, is it not, of where we draw the line? If a piece of research is proving very difficult, and would be very resource-intensive and so on, that will obviously make it less likely to be done than if it is a more straightforward piece.

Mel Stride: Yes. My right hon. and learned Friend makes a very important point. As I have already pointed out, around major fiscal events we have household distributional analysis, which covers welfare, taxation and public expenditure. It takes a cumulative approach to that information and it is often relied upon by Government to take subsequent decisions. We also have, on substantial individual tax and national insurance contribution measures, tax impact and information notes—the so-called TIINs—which were introduced in 2010 and were not there under the previous Labour Government. We are, therefore, doing a number of things, both in the context of major fiscal events and on a tax-by-tax, national insurance-by-national insurance change basis, which look to provide just the kind of information that informs decisions around equality.

The third part of new clause 9 relates to the taxes to which this analysis would apply. On income tax, as I have said, we are looking at impacts on households. We may raise the personal allowance, as we did in the last Budget. That is now up to £11,500. It could be argued that that disproportionately favours one sex over another, but when we look at the effect on the household, income is typically distributed within families, within households and within the family unit. That is extremely difficult—in fact, I would go as far as to say impossible—to capture.

Stella Creasy: The Minister made that point the last time we tried to discuss this issue. Forgive me, but he seems to be presuming that a household is a man and a woman. Has he managed to get his head around single person households and single women, because women’s incomes are disproportionately hit by Government policy? At the very least, could he manage to measure the women who are affected by his tax and policy changes who do not live with a man who might confuse them?

Mel Stride: If the hon. Lady can come up with a sure-fire way of identifying women who live with men who do not confuse them, we will probably make some progress. The point I am making is that this area is
riddled with huge complexity, yet new clause 9 seeks to achieve the presentation of reports and assessments that have the imprimatur of Government and the Treasury upon them. They are relied upon to take very important decisions, yet the arguments I am prosecuting suggest that we would actually end up with an incomplete picture. In fact, I would go further than that and say that they could be misleading in a way that would be unhelpful to what I know the hon. Lady is seeking to achieve and indeed what the Government are also seeking to achieve.

Helen Whately: Does the Minister share the view expressed by many of us this afternoon that while those on the Opposition Benches are looking for very complicated analysis that may, unfortunately, be rather misleading, we actually have a very strong track record, if we take a step back, of reducing inequality and making things better for those on the lowest incomes?

Mel Stride: Yes. My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. We know that the gender pay gap is at its lowest level on record, for example. That is a very substantial achievement and we are making considerable headway in that particular respect.

Some of the other taxes mentioned in new clause 9 include employment and disguised remuneration. Disguised remuneration is a highly complicated area, as the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) will know, having discussed it in some detail in Committee. The mind boggles as to how one would possibly unpack the effects on the various protected characteristics of that particular taxation. Pension schemes are also extremely complicated. Settlements and air passenger duty are perhaps a little bit easier than some of the others, but the point is that overall—and we have to look at the new clause in its entirety—new clause 9 is extremely complicated indeed.

Finally, there should be no doubt that those of us on the Government Benches are entirely committed to ensuring that we drive the equality agenda and drive it very hard indeed. We should, as my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) suggested, look to our own record in that respect. We now have more women in work than at any time in our history. In the past year, 60% of employment growth came from female employment. We have the lowest gender pay gap in full-time employment ever. Those companies employing 250 employees or more, as we have said often in this debate, are now required by law to provide a gender wage audit. Contrary to what the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) suggested, there are teeth. Penalties can be applied by the ECHR, and fines can follow where that is not done. For those who are disabled, we spend a record amount in excess of £50 billion a year on benefits. As has been said by a number of Government Members, the national living wage has disproportionately helped some of the most needy in our society. When we talk about equality on this side of the House, we mean it. I urge the House to reject new clause 9.

Dawn Butler: Having a detailed understanding of how policy choices exacerbate or eliminate inequality at every stage of policy making is key to tackling burning injustices and producing good policies. I wish to put new clause 9 to the vote.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 265, Noes 304.

Division No. 118] [3.27 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, rh Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin

Dods, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Emlore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Frith, James
Furmis, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glinson, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Dr David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hug, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen

P.
Tellers for the Ayes:

Zeichner, Daniel  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Wishart, Pete  
Wilson, Phil  
Williams, Dr Paul  
Western, Matt  
West, Catherine  
Walker, Thelma  
Vaz, Valerie  
Ummunna, Chuka  
Vaz, Valeriy  
Walker, Helina  
West, Catherine  
Western, Matt  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Whitfield, Martin  
Williams, Hywel  
Williams, David  
Wilson, Philip  
Wishart, Pete  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Nick Smith and  
Thangam Debbonaire

NOES

Duguid, David  
Duncan, Sir Alan  
Duncan Smith, Rh Iain  
Dunne, Mr Philip  
Ellis, Michael  
Ellwood, Mr Tobias  
Elphicke, Charlie  
Eustice, George  
Evans, Mr Nigel  
Evennett, Rh David  
Fabricant, Michael  
Fallon, Rh Sir Michael  
Fernandes, Suella  
Field, Rh Mark  
Ford, Vicky  
Foster, Kevin  
Fox, Rh Dr Liam  
Frangois, Mr Rh Mark  
Frazier, Lucy  
Freeman, George  
Freer, Mike  
Fysh, Mr Marcus  
Garnier, Mark  
Gauke, Rh Mr David  
Ghani, Ms Nausrat  
Gitivan, Paul  
Glen, John  
Goldsmith, Zac  
Goodwill, Mr Robert  
Gove, Rh Michael  
Graham, Luke  
Graham, Richard  
Grant, Bill  
Grant, Mrs Helen  
Grayling, Rh Chris  
Green, Chris  
Green, Rh Damian  
Greening, Rh Justine  
Grieve, Rh Mr Dominic  
Griffiths, Andrew  
Gyimah, Mr Sam  
Hair, Kirsten  
Halfon, Rh Robert  
Hall, Luke  
Hammond, Rh Mr Philip  
Hammond, Stephen  
Hancock, Rh Matt  
Hands, Rh Greg  
Harper, Rh Mr Mark  
Harrington, Richard  
Harris, Rebecca  
Harrison, Trudy  
Hart, Simon  
Hayes, Rh Mr John  
Heald, Rh Sir Oliver  
Heappey, James  
Heaton-Harris, Chris  
Heaton-Jones, Peter  
Henderson, Gordon  
Herbert, Rh Nick  
Hinds, Rh Damian  
Hoare, Simon  
Hollingbery, George  
Hollinrake, Kevin  
Hollobone, Mr Philip  
Holloway, Adam  
Howell, John  
Huddleston, Nigel  
Hughes, Eddie  
Hunt, Rh Mr Jeremy  
Hurd, Rh Mr Nick
New Clause 3

REVIEW OF OPERATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF BANK LEVY

“(1) Schedule 19 to FA 2011 (bank levy) is amended as follows.

(2) After paragraph 81, insert—

“PART 10

REVIEW

82 (1) Within six months of the passing of the Finance Act 2018, the Chancellor of the Exchequer shall undertake a review of the operation and effectiveness of the bank levy.

(2) The review shall consider in particular—

(a) the effectiveness of the levy in reflecting risks to the financial system and the wider UK economy arising from the banking sector,

(b) the effectiveness of the levy in encouraging banks to move away from riskier funding models,

(c) the revenue effects of the changes to the levy made in Schedule 2 to the Finance (No. 2) Act 2015,

(d) the effectiveness of the anti-avoidance provisions in paragraphs 47 and 48 of this Schedule.

(3) A review shall also compare the effects of the bank levy with those of the bank payroll tax (within the meaning given by Schedule 2 to the Finance Act 2010) in relation to—

(a) revenue, and

(b) the matters specified in sub-paragraph (2)(a) and (b).

(4) A report of the review under this paragraph shall be laid before the House of Commons within one calendar month of its completion.”—(Peter Dowd.)

This new clause requires the Government to carry out a review of the bank levy, including its effectiveness in relation to its stated aims, the revenue effects of the changes made in 2015 and the comparable effectiveness of the bank payroll tax.

Brought up, and read the First time.

3.45 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 4—Public register of entities paying the bank levy and payments made—

“(1) Schedule 19 to FA 2011 (bank levy) is amended as follows.

(2) After paragraph 81, insert—

“PART 11

PUBLIC REGISTER OF PAYMENTS

83 (1) It shall be the duty of the Commissioners for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to maintain a public register of groups paying the bank levy and the amounts paid.
(2) In relation to each group, the register shall state whether it is—
   (a) a UK banking group,
   (b) a building society group,
   (c) a foreign banking group, or
   (d) a relevant non-banking group.
(3) In relation to each group, the register shall state the amount paid in respect of each chargeable period.
(4) In relation to chargeable periods ending between 28 February 2011 and 31 December 2017, the Commissioners must make public the register no later than 31 October 2018.
(5) In respect of subsequent chargeable periods, the Commissioners must make public the updated register no later than ten months after the end of the chargeable period.

This new clause requires HMRC to prepare a public register of banks paying the bank levy and the amount they have paid.

New clause 5—Bank levy: Part 1 of Schedule 9: pre-commencement requirements—

“(1) Part 1 of Schedule 9 shall come into force in accordance with the provisions of this section.
(2) No later than 31 October 2020, the Chancellor of the Exchequer shall lay before the House of Commons an account of the effects of the proposed changes in Part 1 of Schedule 9—
   (a) on the public revenue,
   (b) in reflecting risks to the financial system and the wider UK economy arising from the banking sector, and
   (c) in encouraging banks to move away from riskier funding models.
(3) Part 1 of Schedule 9 shall have effect in relation to chargeable periods ending on or after 1 January 2021 if, no earlier than 30 November 2020, the House of Commons comes to a resolution to that effect.”

This new clause requires the Government to provide a separate analysis of the impact of Part 1 of Schedule 9 nearer to the time of proposed implementation in 2021 and to seek the separate agreement of the House of Commons to commencement in the light of that review.

Amendment 1, in schedule 9, page 134, line 2, at end insert—

“34A After paragraph 81 insert—

“PART 10

REVIEW OF ENTITIES ON WHICH THE BANK LEVY IS CHARGED

82(1) Within six months of the passing of the Finance Act 2018, the Chancellor of the Exchequer shall undertake a review of the provisions in this Schedule defining which groups are covered by the bank levy.
(2) The review shall consider in particular—
   (i) the adequacy of those provisions in applying the bank levy to groups that are—
      (a) not a group in paragraph 4(2) and
      (b) derive their income from investments in the manner of a group in paragraph 4(2),
   (ii) the adequacy of the groups in paragraph 4(2) in charging the bank levy to lending and investment entities,
   (iii) the degree to which the groups in paragraph 4(2) reflect lending and investment entities that have entered into contracts with public sector bodies,
   (iv) the adequacy of the definition of “investment group” in paragraph 12(9) in reflecting lending and investment entities that have entered into contracts with public sector bodies, and
   (v) the revenue effects of changes to include lending and investment entities that have entered into contracts with public sector bodies within groups covered by the levy.
(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer shall lay a report of the review under this paragraph before the House of Commons as soon as practicable after its completion.”

This amendment requires a review about the appropriate extent of the bank levy in terms of the lending and investment entities which it covers, considering the extent to which it covers PFI finance groups and assessing the revenue effects of such an extension.

Amendment 5, page 134, line 6, leave out from “in” to end of line 7 and insert “accordance with the provisions of section (bank levy: Part 1 of Schedule 9: pre-commencement requirements)”.

This amendment is consequential on NC5.

Amendment 2, page 134, line 10, at end insert—

“37 The amendments made by paragraph 34A have effect from the day on this Act is passed.”

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 3A.
How did the Government plan to defeat socialism in our modern age—the age of the fourth industrial revolution and the internet of things? The answer was that they held a raffle. While no doubt discussing the bank levy and issues relating to it, they raffled, at £100 a ticket, an eight-gun, 500- pheasant and partridge shoot donated by a millionaire hedge fund supporter who must know a great deal about the bank levy. That is how the Government will defeat socialism: by slaughtering 500 partridges and pheasants.

To keep Tory MPs’s spirits up, the Chief Whip recently sent them all a letter telling them that their performance in Parliament had been “excellent”, and that “Remaining united in Parliament is a vital part of ensuring that Jeremy Corbyn remains in opposition”—I am not sure whether he was trying to convince his colleagues or himself. And so it goes on. It is little wonder that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has suggested that Ministers would have to be locked in a room for any agreement to be reached—that is, if they could all find the same room. I would agree with that suggestion, on the condition that we could throw away the key. Meanwhile, the Treasury has been briefing the press that the spring statement will be scaled back to include no Red Box, no official document, no spending increases and no tax changes—and perhaps no embarrassing U-turns either—as well as, no doubt, an inability, yet again, to talk about the bank levy, what we could do with it, and how we could make progress with it.

Rather than the Government outlining a long-term economic plan, we have yet another Finance Bill engineered for the benefit of the few. There is little in the Bill to tackle our dreadful productivity performance, stuttering growth, high inflation and lack of investment in our infrastructure and people, but if we raised more from the banking levy, we could do something about that. In that context, the Government have come up with the bright idea of offering another tax break to the banks by further limiting the scope of the bank levy. That would ensure that, from 2020, banks will pay the levy and perhaps no embarrassing U-turns either—as well as, no doubt, an inability, yet again, to talk about the bank levy, what we could do with it, and how we could make progress with it.

Our position on the bank levy has been clear: we have consistently argued for a more proportionate levy and pointed out that the levy, which would introduced in 2011, would raise substantially less than Labour’s bankers’ bonus tax. In short, we have always stood against the Government’s divisive austerity fetish.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I must gently point out that the Labour party’s position on the bank levy has been anything but clear. Labour Members opposed the levy when it was first introduced. They then called for it to be retained, and their amendments today propose neither retaining nor abolishing it. As the hon. Gentleman’s party’s position is entirely unclear, perhaps he could take this opportunity to clarify it.

Peter Dowd: We opposed the levy because it was a reduction in the taxes that the banks were paying. I know the hon. Gentleman wants to be generous to people who already have money and very ungenerous to those who do not have money, but he should give considerable thought to that before he makes such interventions, because it does not do his party’s reputation any good, as that sort of approach is mean and miserly.
That was why we voted against the levy during our consideration of the 2011 Finance Bill, which introduced the bank levy along with cuts to corporation tax and tax giveaways for the most well-off—that is the context. It was also why we expressed concern in 2015 about the Government’s cuts to the bank levy and the introduction of the corporation tax surcharge, and it is why we will vote against this measure today. We will support my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who will—I suspect forlornly—call for a review of the effects of making provisions to discount excess profits of a private finance initiative company for the purpose of calculating the aggregate of the interest allowance of worldwide groups under the provisions in part 10 of the Taxation (International and other Provisions) Act 2010. We support that as a step in the right direction to tackle the whole construct and operation of PFIs schemes, which was a policy announced last September by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), the shadow Chancellor.

The bank levy was not the brainchild of a Conservative Government. It was not introduced because the previous Chancellor had been suddenly moved by public outrage about reckless decisions made by some in the banking sector who plunged us into the world’s greatest economic crisis in modern times. That is the context for this issue. The levy was not designed to ensure that banks received a tax give away worth a whopping £4.7 billion. It was instead designed to make banks pay their fair share, and I refer Members to the comments about schedule 9 on pages 83 to 93 of the explanatory notes, where that is laid out clearly and unambiguously.

In fact, the very concept of a bank levy was developed at the G20 summit in Pittsburgh in 2009. It was championed by the previous Labour Government, who subsequently introduced the bankers’ bonus tax. In the austerity Budget of 2011, the coalition Government decided to dump the bankers’ bonus tax and to adopt the bank levy. At that time, Labour made it clear that the levy threshold was far too low when compared with the money that would have been raised if the Government had stuck with Labour’s bonus tax. Ministers folded under pressure from the banks and set the levy at a lower rate of £2.6 billion.

The threshold was established—here we come to the issue of experts and taking expert advice—despite Treasury officials openly acknowledging it to be far too low. Under the original Treasury plans, the levy would have raised £3.9 billion a year, which is nearly £1.3 billion more than the £2.6 billion that has been indicated. But the then Government, lobbied by the privileged few, ensured that the threshold remained low. At 0.078% for short-term liabilities and 0.39% for long-term liabilities, the level that was set was—not to put too fine a point on it—a pretty tasteless joke compared with that of other countries that introduced a similar levy. It was less than a third of the level set in France, substantially smaller than the level in Hungary, which was set at 0.53%, and even lower than that of the United States of America. In 2015, under pressure from some of the Government’s friends in the finance sector, the then Chancellor cut the bank levy rate, and the current occupant of No. 11 has continued on that particular sojourn. In so doing, he has ensured that, by 2020, the UK’s biggest banks will have received a tax giveaway worth a whopping £4.7 billion. That £4.7 billion could be spent on our public services, and notably on children’s services, which have been cut to the bone.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman says that the banking sector has received a whacking tax cut. I will dispute that further in my later comments, but the figures are these: in 2009-10, the banking sector paid £17.3 billion in tax; last year, it paid £27.3 billion. That represents a 58% increase. So, far from having a tax giveaway, the banks are now paying more in taxes than they were six years ago by some margin.

Peter Dowd: That is not surprising: the banks returned to profitability because the taxpayer bankrolled them. That was how they got back into profitability, and they must pay their fair share of taxes as a result. The constituents of every Member of Parliament paid towards that, and when the profits came back in, the taxes went back up. We have helped the banks out, and they have to help our public services out.

The Government claimed that their introduction of the 8% corporation tax surcharge would offset the cuts to the bank levy. If we look at the autumn’s Budget Red Book and the forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility, however, we clearly see that the surcharge will not match the fall in the bank levy. According to forecasts, the surcharge is set to increase by £300 million a year, while the receipts that the Exchequer receives from the levy will fall by £1.7 billion a year. That leaves a £1.4 billion gap. That is a fact that is printed in the Government’s Red Book and, as John Adams opined, “facts are stubborn things”.

In 2018, we are still feeling the economic consequences of the actions of the banks. Every day, the Government tell us that there is no money for productive investment and that austerity must continue, yet they have conspired to undermine and limit any remuneration from the banks that caused this sorry state of affairs in the first place. Once again, the Opposition’s ability to amend this Bill has been hamstrung and blocked by the Government’s continued use of arcane parliamentary procedure.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): The person who said that there was no money left was actually the occupant of the Treasury who left a note for the incoming Conservative-Liberal coalition Government in 2010. The reality is that of course there is money. We raise taxes and we spend them exceptionally wisely as a Conservative Government, particularly on infrastructure which, as the hon. Gentleman must surely agree, is now at record levels. It is just that we are still having to clear up the mess that was left by the last Labour Government.

Peter Dowd: The right hon. Lady can believe what she wants, but who will pay any attention to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury who took over from a Labour Chief Secretary to the Treasury, but was out of that job within two weeks because of issues around his parliamentary expenses? Does she expect us to pay any attention to that whatever? [Interruption.] That was what happened. David Laws—

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Peter Dowd: I will not give way. I am going to move on—

Anna Soubry: There’s a surprise!

Peter Dowd: The right hon. Lady can come back later on. This is not a dialogue, as you would no doubt tell me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We have a timid, feckless and self-obsessed Government who are frightened of their own shadow. They continue to give more money back to the banks, notwithstanding the fact that they keep telling us that the resources coming into the Government are insufficient to support our public services.

We are seeking three things by moving new clause 3. First, we want to require the Government to carry out a review of the bank levy, including of its effectiveness in relation to its stated aims. Secondly, we want to establish the extent of the effect of the 2015 cuts on revenues from the levy. Thirdly, we wish to calculate how much would have been raised if the Government had stuck with Labour’s bankers’ bonus tax. Such a report would put under the microscope for all to see the Government’s malpractice—that is what it amounts to—in cutting frontline services while offering tax giveaways to banks that can more than afford them. It would require the Minister to acknowledge that far more would have been raised under Labour’s bankroll tax and, just as importantly, that the Government’s current bank levy has done little to influence and mitigate the risky banking practices that remain in use in our financial services industry.

4 pm

It is also unsurprising and indicative of this Government that they have failed to keep a record of the banks that regularly pay the levy or a full list of how much they have actually paid. We would like that information, which is why, in the name of transparency—a concept alien to the Government—the Opposition have tabled new clause 4, which would create a public register for the bank levy. Once we can see the true cost of the Government’s policies, we can grasp the extent of their choices, and how they have favoured a small privileged group over the many citizens who are in desperate need of support. That goes to the heart of the new clause.

My concerns about the bank levy do not merely relate to how the banking sector is taxed and regulated; they speak directly to this Government’s approach. Government is the business of making choices, and in this case the Government have chosen to put in place a giveaway worth billions of pounds for the wealthy few instead of helping to end austerity for the many, or even for a few of the many. Looking at it from any angle, this is a shameful set of affairs, and it becomes even more shameful when it appears that the money foregone to banks through a cut to the levy could have been used to support our children’s services, which are in a state of atrophy as a direct result of the Government’s choices.

Only in the past two or three days, the Government have admitted to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), the shadow early years Minister, that cash-strapped local authorities have been forced to close more than 500 children’s centres. Those closures are a direct result of cuts to the funding of children’s services. Research published by Barnardo’s in December found that funding for children’s centres in England had been halved since 2010 from £1.2 billion to £600 million. That is why we want a review in relation to the bank levy.

The picture is set to worsen. Last week, Norfolk County Council approved plans to halve its £10 million budget for children’s centres to try to cope with the cuts being passed to them by the Government. On the same day, councillors in Somerset unanimously agreed to close two thirds of its children’s centres. That is why we want to look at the bank levy and why we want a review. We do not yet have an assessment of the specific impact of austerity in Northamptonshire, where the Conservative council faces meltdown as a direct result of the Government’s agenda. It is safe to say that children will no doubt be suffering as much as the wider population as public services edge closer to collapse. That is why we want a review of the banking levy.

As services have been decimated over the past seven years, we have seen a doubling of serious child protection cases and twice the number of children put into care protection plans. We want a review so that we can compare and contrast. Last year, 70,000 children were placed into care. Support for foster care, adoption and Sure Start children’s centres has all been reduced, and we want to work out how to support such services. Youth centres are closing, and short breaks for disabled children that are provided by local councils to give parents a break are going. Is that what we want? That is why we want to examine the banking levy.

Taken together, the cuts mean that some of the most vulnerable children in our country are paying the price for seven years of the Government’s economic strategy. Meanwhile, the bank levy is being cut, so we want to examine that and check things out. That is why we are challenging the Government to support our review. Asking children to pay the price of reducing the levy is unacceptable mismanagement. In fact, Sir Tony Hawkhead has described the “devastating cost” to children’s services, which he says have been left “on an unstable and dangerous footing.”

Prevention and protection services, which are vital to the proper care of our nation’s children, could be provided for if the banking levy were not cut. That would be a welcome relief to those services.

We demand that the Government change course on the banking levy. That might make them unpopular with some people, but children come first, not the Government’s friends. That is why we are asking for this review. A review is the right thing to do for millions of children who need Government support to have the best chance in life. Should the Minister decide to do the right thing and match Labour’s plans to invest in children’s services, he will receive our full backing.

The anti-avoidance measures in the Bill are feeble and listless when we consider the scale of the problem at hand. Both the Panama papers and the Paradise papers revealed tax avoidance on an industrial scale being operated in British overseas territories and Crown dependencies, yet the Government have responded with feigned interest and a handful of measures. The Minister, in his effort to keep up the appearance of being seen to do something, has instead reinforced the view that this Government are on the side of the tax avoiders, not the taxpayers. I can hear the Minister chatting away from a sedentary position. I am not sure whether that is because he does not agree with me, but he knows it is true. There is no question about it.
Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being generous with his time. He is trying to suggest that the Government have a bad track record on clamping down on avoidance and evasion. The key measure of that is the tax gap, which was 8% under the last Labour Government and has now fallen to 6%—that is the lowest in the world. Will he congratulate the Financial Secretary to the Treasury on that achievement and acknowledge that this Government are doing a better job in this area than the last Labour Government?

Peter Dowd: That does not take international profit shifting into account, as the hon. Gentleman knows. He should consider that.


Labour’s tax transparency and enforcement programme has outlined 16 measures that the Government could take immediately to crack down on tax avoidance, including holding a public inquiry and publishing a public register of offshore trusts. In that fashion, new clause 6 would require the Government to commission a review of the effectiveness of the Bill’s anti-avoidance provisions and their impact on reducing the tax gap. I am proud of Labour’s measures on tax avoidance, and I am proud to stand here and say that.

Members should ponder this question: how can the Government possibly justify cuts in the banking levy while, on average, 30% of our children—it is even more in some constituencies—live in poverty? That question will not go away, however much the Government want it to.

Chris Philp: As always, it is an enormous pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), whose speeches are always entertaining and occasionally informative. He spent a great deal of time talking about the bank levy and the various new clauses standing in his name on that topic. I wish to start by addressing the central thesis of his comments on the bank levy: his suggestion that banks are not paying their fair share, particularly as two of them received state money from about 2009.

It is a matter of incontrovertible fact that banks, as organisations, are paying more tax proportionately than other kinds of corporates. It is of course right that they do, for the reason that the hon. Gentleman and my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) mentioned: they did receive taxpayer money. They pay this extra money, compared with other businesses, in two ways. The first is through the surplus profit tax of 8%—they pay about a third more corporation tax proportionately than a non-bank corporation does. The second is through the bank levy. Although the bank levy is being reduced, it will remain in force, so banks will continue to pay proportionately more tax than non-bank businesses after the implementation of this Budget. That is a vital point to get across.

The hon. Gentleman also tried to link funding for children’s services to the bank levy. In one of my interventions, I gave some figures on the total amount of tax that banks are paying. We can argue about why they are paying that extra tax. Clearly, it is at least in part due to the surplus profits rate and to the bank levy. It may also, in part, be due to the fact that the banks’ profits have increased. Whatever the cause, the bare fact is that they are paying £7 billion or £8 billion a year more in tax now than they were some time ago. So suggesting that children’s services have been deprived of money as a consequence of changes to bank taxation simply does not bear scrutiny, given that the financial services sector is paying significantly more tax than it was before, whatever the cause of that may be.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is, as he knows, unfairly paraphrasing my hon. Friend the shadow Chief Secretary. What my hon. Friend has pointed out is that politics is about choices and that this Government have decided, through this set of proposals, to reduce the amount of tax the banks will pay, in a situation where many core services in this country—public services that are supported by Members on both sides of the House—are on their knees. So references to the background situation or attempts to paraphrase what my colleague said are not correct. He is simply making an analysis of the choices this Government have made, which do not bear scrutiny.

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention but, as I say, the central, key, cold, hard fact, which will not go away, is that financial services are paying £8 billion or £9 billion more in tax now than they were before. That is money that can be spent on children’s services in his constituency or in mine, on the NHS or on schools. We should welcome the fact that the sector is producing this extra taxation, partly because it has become more successful and partly because the rate of tax has progressively been increased over the past seven or eight years.

The hon. Gentleman made a point about choices and his intervention was unpinned by an assumption: that if we increase the rate of taxation, we invariably raise more revenue. I challenge that assertion, as the famous Laffer curve clearly does. It is clear to me that it is possible to reduce the rate of taxation and at the same time collect more tax, because we, thus, incentivise investment and growth. There is no better illustration of that than the trajectory of corporation tax, taken as a whole, over the past seven years: the rate of corporation
tax has come down from 28% to 19%—it is heading down to 17% in a couple of years—yet the cash take from corporation tax over that same period has gone from about £35 billion to about £53 billion or £55 billion. That goes to show that we can cut the rate of tax and, by stimulating the economy and investment, actually collect more money. Similarly, it does not follow that putting up the rate of tax necessarily means that more money is collected, because that might disincentivise investment and job creation.

4.15 pm

Jonathan Reynolds: I feel that we have had this discussion in many of the debates on the many Finance Bills we have debated over the past 12 months. No one on the Opposition Benches denies the existence of the Laffer curve; we simply point out, as a point of fact, that the very large reductions in corporation tax that the Government have introduced have cost the country revenue. That is not in dispute. The analysis is clear that it is not the case that, had the corporation tax rate remained as it was when the Conservatives came to power, more tax would not have been generated.

On new clause 3, as the hon. Gentleman knows, the bank levy is a levy on the risk-assessed capital that is on the big banks’ balance sheets. The Laffer curve would not apply to the calculation of what the return would be if the levy remained the same.

Chris Philp: Let me take each of those points in turn. The hon. Gentleman asserts that, had the corporation tax rate remained at 28%, we would now be collecting more than £53 billion. That is an assertion, and not one with which one can agree without contention. For example, because of the lower corporation tax rate, plenty of businesses have made investments that they would not have made otherwise. Several companies had located their corporate headquarters outside the UK—

Peter Dowd rose—

Chris Philp: Just a moment; let me respond to these two points.

Those companies had located their corporate headquarters outside the UK and so paid corporation tax outside the UK, but in response to the Government’s cutting the rate of tax, they came back onshore and now pay corporation tax here. It does not follow at all that a higher corporation tax rate—28% in the case mentioned by the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds)—would lead to a higher tax yield. The direction of travel shows that, as the rate has come down, the amount collected has gone up. I just do not agree with the suggestion that, if the corporation tax rate were 28%, we would be collecting £60 billion or £70 billion.

Jonathan Reynolds rose—

Chris Philp: If the hon. Gentleman will let me answer his second point, I shall happily take an intervention. He suggested that, because the bank levy is a tax on a balance sheet, there is no Laffer curve effect. I dispute that. Banks are mostly international—for example, our largest bank, HSBC, is a very international bank—and they can choose where they deploy capital. Their finance director will sit and decide where to allocate capital around the world. If the taxation or regulatory regime in a particular jurisdiction leads to the returns in that jurisdiction being unattractive, they will rationally respond to that by allocating their resources. In this case, their bank equity—somewhere else. There is undoubtedly a Laffer curve effect in relation to the bank levy.

Before I take the two interventions that I promised to take, and will, let me just say that all that links to a related point mentioned by the shadow Chief Secretary, the hon. Member for Bootle: the disapplication of the bank levy to the non-UK part of a UK-headquartered bank’s balance sheet. In these international times, a bank such as HSBC can choose where it is headquartered and domiciled. HSBC was famously thinking about moving two or three years ago. HSBC is a good example because I think the majority of its balance sheet is non-UK—it has huge operations in Africa and the far east. Were we to continue to levy the bank levies on HSBC’s non-UK balance sheet, there would be a powerful, perhaps even irresistible, temptation for it to change its arrangements such that those profits and that balance sheet were booked through some other centre, such as Shanghai, or probably more likely Hong Kong, or possibly Singapore.

It is beneficial to the UK to have those HSBC assets booked here, because, of course, we get the corporation tax, including the corporation tax surcharge, booked through London, and there are clearly jobs connected with that. If we leave the bank levy on the non-UK balance sheet—the business is done overseas but booked here—and drive the booking overseas, we will lose that corporation tax and those jobs. The change to the bank levy is a sensible measure that will protect London’s status as an international financial centre, because the relevant part of the balance sheet is very internationally mobile.

I think there are two, or perhaps even three, interventions stacking up, so I shall happily take them all.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. This argument is integral to the economic prosperity of the UK. On the point that he has just raised, I say clearly that we should wish to keep that substantial national asset, which is our financial services industry, in the UK, but it is Brexit that will drive it away. HSBC’s plans at the minute, in terms of relocating staff, are entirely linked to wholesale banking functions under Brexit. However, if there is one phrase that I would wish to etch on to the door of this Chamber, it is that causation and correlation are not the same thing, and that applies to his corporation tax argument. The average rate of corporation tax in OECD countries is 25%. There is a diminishing return from reducing it. When even Conservative councils are effectively going bankrupt, surely that requires greater reflection and self-analysis of the disastrous trajectory of some of the Government’s tax policies over the past eight years.

Chris Philp: A number of points have been raised there. On the point about correlation and causation, of course I understand that they are not the same thing. However, in my remarks about corporation tax reductions, I did point to some of the causal links. The two causal links that I cited were, first, encouraging investment and, secondly, companies choosing to move their domicile—for example, from Switzerland back to the
UK. Therefore, there are two causal explanations as to why a reduction in the rate of tax might lead to an increase in the tax yield.

Peter Dowd: The explanatory statement for new clause 3 says:

“This new clause requires the Government to carry out a review of the bank levy, including its effectiveness in relation to its stated aims, the revenue effects of the changes made in 2015 and the comparable effectiveness of the bank payroll tax.”

The stated aim, as set out in the Government's own document, is as follows:

“Its purpose is to ensure that banks and building societies make a fair contribution, reflecting the risks they pose”.

We are asking for a review. If the hon. Gentleman is so sure of his facts and his case, why not have the review and see who is right in this debate?

Chris Philp: The Government conduct analyses and reviews the whole time. I am not sure whether we need to put the review into primary legislation. As the hon. Gentleman refers to new clauses 3 and 4, which stand in his name, I will turn to them now.

The new clauses call for various reviews and registers. Of course, analysis is important. That analysis, I believe, takes place in the Treasury already—I am sure that the Financial Secretary will comment on that in due course.

What is interesting about the new clauses tabled by the Opposition is not so much what is in them, as what is not in them—it is the dog that did not bark, if I can borrow from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

I mentioned in an intervention that the Labour party appears to have taken a number of different positions on the bank levy: it voted against it in 2011; it voted against the surplus tax in 2015, and then it stated in public that it wished to leave the bank levy in place, despite having voted against its introduction, which strikes me as rather confused. I was rather hoping that its new clauses and amendments might enlighten us on what its position actually is on the bank levy. This is primary legislation. This is a finance Bill soon to become, I hope, a finance Act. The Opposition had a chance to put the review into primary legislation. As the hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) is required to advise on such matters, I think, by Winston Churchill in 1929, effectively to stop us moving any substantive amendments. Does he not recognise that, whatever we wanted to do, we would not have been able to change things anyway, because the Government were not permitting us to do so?

Chris Philp: I am not sure. This is a moment when my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) is required to advise on such matters. I do not share his expertise in parliamentary procedure. However, the shadow Chief Secretary did not specify in his quite extensive—and, at times, amusing—remarks the official Opposition’s position on the bank levy. There is certainly no parliamentary procedure that prohibited him from doing so, so he could quite easily have chosen to specify his exact view—whether the bank levy should continue as it is, go or do something else—but he did not do so. I am rather disappointed by the lack of clarity on that point.

The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde said a few moments ago in one of his many interventions that HSBC might contemplate its jurisdiction in the light of Brexit. In fact, HSBC was debating where to domicile itself well before the referendum. If anyone or anything threatens the City of London’s status as a global financial centre, it is not the matters being debated today and it is not Brexit. In fact, it is the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and the comments he made a day or two ago, which, in the words of one commentator, threatened to turn London into a new version of Pyongyang. That is what he said. It was in the Evening Standard—a newspaper edited by a highly reputable journalist.

PwC has done some analysis of the tax contribution made by the financial services sector, finding that it paid £72.1 billion in taxes last year. That is about 9% of the UK’s total tax take. It is no laughing matter when misguided and populist politicians take a cheap shot at the City to get some headlines. If business is driven away, the implications will be very severe for our tax take and for employment. If we lose the tax revenue generated by the City, the people affected will of course be children and the NHS.

I ask the shadow Chief Secretary to convey gently to his dear leader that comments such as those made a day or two ago are very unhelpful to the City. They endanger jobs and jeopardise the £72 billion of tax that the City pays. Whether it is through fiscal measures or through words, it is a very serious matter when we endanger jobs and the tax revenue from the City that funds about two thirds of the NHS’s budget. In this Bill and in our words, we should protect that tax revenue and those jobs.

Peter Dowd: I am more than happy to convey the hon. Gentleman’s comments to the Leader of the Opposition, although I do not accept them. Will the hon. Gentleman also pass on my comments to the Prime Minister? She is making a mess of Brexit, which is far more dangerous to this country than the comments allegedly made by the Leader of the Opposition.

Chris Philp: There is no allegation; they were said publicly. I will of course convey the hon. Gentleman’s comments in a spirit of reciprocation, but I dispute the remarks about Brexit. We saw fantastic progress before Christmas and are moving on to the next stage. I look forward to the series of speeches by my Cabinet colleagues in the coming days and weeks that I appreciate are on a different topic to the one at hand.

Jonathan Reynolds: I must defend the Leader of the Opposition. The comments that he made to the EEF national manufacturing conference were simply that...
finance must serve industry and that this country has to find ways to increase lending to businesses, to have more productive outcomes for the economy and to lower regional inequality—all things that were previously said by the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, who now finds work as the editor of the Evening Standard. I do not think that that is unreasonable in any sense. The feedback I have had from that conference is that the reception in the room was very favourable.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Chris Philp—on new clause 3.

Chris Philp: Well. I am not sure whether I can respond to the hon. Gentleman’s comments while adhering to Madam Deputy Speaker’s gentle guidance, other than to say that I think that the Leader of the Opposition’s remarks went rather further than the hon. Gentleman just suggested.

Perhaps it is time to move on to the measures relating to tax avoidance and evasion, particularly new clause 6. The shadow Chief Secretary made a series of quite serious allegations about the Government’s effectiveness over the past seven years in combating tax avoidance and evasion. I disagree quite strongly with the premise of his points. He suggested that the current Government had been slow to act—indeed, had not acted—in these areas. I gently draw his attention to the fact that in the past eight years since 2010 the Government have taken 75 different measures designed to combat tax evasion and tax avoidance that have raised, cumulatively, £160 billion.

4.30 pm

Many of those measures close egregious and glaring loopholes that had been left open by the previous Labour Government. For example, under the previous Labour Government, it was possible to have permanent non-dom status, yet the Bill will end permanent non-dom status. Prior to 2010, we had the ludicrous situation of the so-called Mayfair tax loophole whereby some people in the hedge fund industry ended up paying less tax than their cleaners—a 10% rate—by having their carried interest taxed as capital gains with the benefit of entrepreneurs relief. That loophole has been closed and then progressively tightened up in successive Budgets. The diverted profits tax is raising money. Avoiding stamp duty by placing residential property into corporate wrappers has been tightened up. There is probably more we can do, but things have certainly been tightened up. We have made sure that foreign purchasers of residential property pay capital gains tax on their disposals. Under the Bill, that will shortly be applied to disposals of commercial property as well.

I have listed five or six of the 75 measures I mentioned, all of which have been taken since 2010. That is no accident. There is a causal link, not just a correlation, between those actions and the additional amounts of tax being collected.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sorry that I was late for the beginning of the hon. Gentleman’s speech. He has given us a litany of what Conservative Governments have done over the past seven years. The Conservative Government before the previous Labour Government did not do very much about all the loopholes that he has listed.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman is asking me to comment on the actions of the Government of over 20 years ago. I am commenting on the actions of the Government who have been in office for the past eight years, whose record is one that I am proud of and stand behind.

Because of these measures, our tax gap has reduced, as I said in an intervention, from 8% to 6%—the lowest in the world, and better than under the last Labour Government. When I made that intervention, I heard the shadow Chief Secretary make reference to profit shifting. Profit shifting is a serious matter. That is why I am pleased that the UK Government were at the forefront of the OECD’s BEPS—base erosion and profit shifting—initiative. Action 5 of that is specifically designed to clamp down on so-called profit shifting. I accept that this is an issue, and I am pleased that the UK Government have been taking action in that area.

Rachel Maclean: I am delighted that my hon. Friend, from his position of expertise, is reminding us of what a great record we have of collecting tax, rightly—tax that pays for schools, hospitals and police services up and down the country, as well as in Redditch, of course, which I care about the most. Does he agree that we have collected £12.5 billion more than if we had left the tax gap in the same state that Labour left us with? That is £12.5 billion to be spent in everyone’s constituency.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The fact that the tax gap is 6% rather than the 8% bequested to us by Gordon Brown sounds like a theoretical point, but that two percentage point difference, as she rightly says, amounts to billions of pounds funding the NHS and schools. In debating these avoidance measures, we are not talking about something theoretical and of academic interest: it is precisely these measures that fund our public services, and that is why they are so important.

Turning to the Opposition’s amendments and new clauses, I was rather surprised, on looking at the amendment paper earlier today, to see that new clause 6 once again calls for a review and analysis—analysis which, I am sure, is already conducted by the Treasury, as the Financial Secretary will no doubt point out. But there was an absence—a silence and a desert; tumbleweed was rolling across the amendment paper—where I would have expected to see an abundance of ideas that we might have adopted from the fertile mind of the shadow Chief Secretary. If he could not have proposed ideas in an amendment for some arcane parliamentary procedural reason, he might at least have done so in his speech.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury is an extremely attentive and receptive Minister. Had the shadow Chief Secretary proposed some constructive ideas, I am sure that the Financial Secretary would have listened carefully. I am very disappointed that after all the noise and, I dare say, bluster—I hope that is not unparliamentary—that we heard in the shadow Chief Secretary’s speech, we did not hear any concrete ideas. We cry out for and are open to new ideas, yet we did not hear any in what was otherwise an amusing and entertaining speech. I am disappointed.

If the Financial Secretary is in the market for new ideas on avoidance, as I am sure he is, one idea is that we could give some thought to ensuring that the Land
Registry records the ultimate beneficial ownership of property and land. We discussed that yesterday in our debate on sanctions, and it was suggested by David Cameron a couple of years ago. When the ultimate beneficial ownership of those properties changed, we might then levy stamp duty on that change as though the physical property had been transferred. A lot of high-end residential property is held in non-UK corporate wrappers, and when the property is transferred, rather than selling it, as we would sell our properties, ownership of the company is transferred. There is no record of that in the UK and therefore no stamp duty is paid. That idea might well raise some more stamp duty. I could hardly criticise the shadow Chief Secretary for his lack of ideas without proposing at least one myself. I hope that Ministers will give some thought to that idea in due course.

In conclusion—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I am glad I have said something that finds favour among Opposition Members. I must have set a record for the number of interventions taken, though there was only one from my own side. The action on the bank levy contemplated in the Bill is the right one. We are taxing banks more heavily than non-banks. We are raising more money than ever before, but we must be mindful of the risk of driving these companies or part of them overseas at a time when they contribute 9% of our total income.

On avoidance and evasion, I am proud that this Government have delivered the lowest tax gap in the world and improved by a quarter the position that they inherited. That pays for public services, as pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). It is a good record, and I am proud of it. I look forward to supporting the Bill.

Stella Creasy: I rise to support the amendments tabled by the Opposition and to speak to my amendments 1 to 4.

I was into PFI before all the cool kids were. These amendments speak to a long-held concern of mine, which is that it is not enough for us as politicians to identify when something has gone wrong and to shrug our shoulders and say, “It’s complicated.” The consequences for the communities we represent and for this country’s public finances are so toxic that it is vital we act.

George Bernard Shaw said: “Political necessities sometimes turn out to be political mistakes.” Let me be clear that I am not seeking to blame anyone. Governments of all colours used PFI. It started in 1992 and has gone on to the present day. Absolutely, the last Labour Government used PFI to fund things, and it was not an ideological decision; it was a very simple one about keeping borrowing off the books.

However, we know now just how costly these decisions have been for this country. Every single school, hospital, street lighting system and motorway built was needed, but we know now that the consequence of these costs is that we may not be able to build such things in the future. I am in the Chamber today to propose a way in which Parliament can now act to get money back for our public services, because everyone of us has one of these projects in our constituencies.

We can talk about the numbers involved: £60 billion of capital building, on which we will pay back £200 billion. These companies are truly the legal loan sharks of the public sector, charging an excessive rate of interest in comparison with public sector borrowing for building and running services for us. Conservative Members may say that the cost I am talking about includes services, so it is worth breaking down the charges. Last year alone, this country paid out £10 billion in PFI repayments, over half of which was for interest and charges. The money we are paying for PFI is not paying for schools and hospitals to be run; it is paying the profits of the companies we borrowed from to be able to build them in the first place.

The National Audit Office has done absolutely sterling work uncovering just how bad a value-for-money calculation it was to go for PFI. On average, these projects are 2% to 4% more expensive than Government borrowing at the time. In total, with charges and fees included, they are now, on average, 40% more expensive than having worked with the public sector.

The interest rate matters because the costs are not necessarily about the management of a project; they are about the profits being made. Every single MP who is being lobbied about their schools and hospitals needs to recognise that 20% of the extra money the Government say they are giving to schools and hospitals will not touch the sides of emergency wards or go into the budgets of teachers to pay for the books and classes our schoolchildren need. It will go straight out of our public sector into pure profit for these companies.

The Centre for Health and the Public Interest has gone through the accounts of the few hundred companies running schools and hospitals to identify just how much money is involved. It found that they will get £1 billion in the form of pre-tax profit from NHS deals alone, which total just 125 of the 700 PFI projects. For example, the company holding the contract for University College London has, alone, made £190 million in the past decade out of the £725 million the NHS has paid out. In short, it has made enough in profits to build and run an entire hospital.

We have to talk about the human cost. I became interested in PFI when I saw the damage it was doing to my local hospital, Whipps Cross in Walthamstow, and to schools such as Frederick Bremer School in Walthamstow. Its headteacher is now desperately struggling to balance her budget in the face of this Government’s swinging cuts to the schools budget, but the one repayment she cannot cut is the PFI one. Barts, the biggest PFI in our NHS—with a £1 billion capital build, and £7 billion repaid—is paying £150 million a year, of which £74 million is interest alone. It is no wonder that the hospital is in such persistent financial difficulty.

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Whipps Cross University Hospital also serves my constituents. To the east, the cost of PFI at Queen’s Hospital in Romford is such that it is creating enormous financial pressures on the Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust. Does she agree with me that that underpins the urgency of the need to tackle this issue? We should not stick to the ideological dogma of the past, but look at what has really happened and claw back some of that excessive greed to better fund our public services.
Stella Creasy: My hon. Friend—my next-door neighbour MP—pre-empts my argument. My amendments relate specifically to the 700 existing contracts, because I believe—I am glad my Front Benchers support this—that we can and must do something urgently about the damage these 700 contracts are doing every single day in schools where headteachers are having to consider sacking people but cannot cut the repayments, and in hospitals that are having to cancel operations but cannot reduce the repayments to their lenders.

There is a sixth-form college in Hayward’s Heath with no sixth form, because nobody will take on the school’s PFI debt. We keep talking about Northamptonshire Council, which is selling its own buildings because it is going bankrupt. It will owe £240 million to just five PFI deals in the next two to five years, of which £77 million is interest payment. Surrey Council is also in financial difficulties. It has £386 million of PFI commitments that it will not be able to reduce, of which £51 million alone is interest.

4.45 pm

We now know, from Carillion and the problems at Interserve, that the idea that working with the private sector would somehow transfer the risk of construction and management projects to the private sector has been thoroughly debunked. It is very, very simple: we do not let schools and hospitals go bust, because we know that that would mean that kids would not get taught and patients would not get treated. So why have we got into deals, and why we continue to get into deals that presume we can somehow get out of them if contractors do not deliver, is a mystery to me. Certainly, a debate for another time in this place would be on a better way to borrow when there is so little competition for our business. I believe that that is where the answer lies.

When we look at the industry and at what amendments 1 to 4 would do, we are not talking about an industry of hundreds of companies. The work by the Centre for Health and the Public Interest found that 92% of all the PFI deals in the NHS were owned or appeared to have been through the 400 pages of the standard contracts. I have been through the accounts. The numbers the Department has resisted some of my questions about are the explicit calculation included on how much corporation tax the companies would pay. Most of the 700 existing deals were signed at rates of 30% or more.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), in his advocacy of cutting corporation tax, would not agree that when these companies face rates of 17% and his local schools and hospitals—I know that many south London hospitals are affected by PFI—are not getting the public investment they desperately need to keep going, the companies should benefit in that way. That was the amount of money that they agreed to pay at the point at which the contracts were signed.

We have been through the accounts. The numbers the Centre for Health and the Public Interest can give are small-c conservative, because we cannot be clear about when companies might have deferred their tax liabilities, but already, in the NHS alone, the companies have had a windfall of £190 million through the reductions in corporation tax, and in our school system they will have had a windfall of £60 million by 2020. That is money we expected for our public services. In addition, we did not expect to pay excessive rates of interest, but the evidence is there. The question for all of us is: what can we do? What action can we take?

Amendments 1 to 4 speak to what we could do now—this year, within months—to send a clear message to the PFI companies that time is up; we are no longer going to accept that kind of contract and the damage they do to our public services. If that small group of companies will not come forward with a proposal to reduce repayments, I gently urge the Minister, whose Department has resisted some of my questions about how often he has met these eight companies, to agree to getting them around the table, examining their loan portfolios and reducing the costs; then, we can start to generate some real savings. Asking individual hospitals and schools to renegotiate, against the companies’ expensive lawyers, will save very little, but if the Government take the lead—I hope the Minister will explain today how he intends to do that—in negotiating with the companies,
we could get money back now. If we cannot get these eight companies to negotiate—if they continue stubbornly to resist any change in the contracts—then yes, let us use a windfall tax to make sure we get cash back for our public services.

Amendment 1 asks for a review. I hope that the hon. Member for Croydon South enjoys as much as I do reading the founding resolutions of legislation such as this Bill and understanding what it is possible to do as a Back Bencher, or as an Opposition Member. The amendment simply asks for a review of how much would be raised were we to apply the bank levy to these financing companies.

If amendment 1 does not tempt the hon. Gentleman, perhaps he could look at amendment 3, which is more explicitly about calculating a windfall tax on the companies. It is designed to enable us to work out how much extra they have made from the original deals, and to claw that back by adjusting their tax allowances. At this point, we are simply trying to clarify how much the measure would raise, to give the Government the negotiating tactic they need to get the companies to do what is right—to get round the table and see how to consolidate their loans, just as we would with people who come to our constituency surgeries having got themselves into debt.

The amendment is about sending a clear message to the industry that Parliament will act—that we will not tolerate another year of listening to headteachers and hospital managers telling us that they cannot cope with these loans. We will do something about it. The Government will claim that the companies are entitled to the bonus because they took on the risk of the buildings, but it is clearly an unexpected bonus, and clearly an opportunity to look at the contracts and make progress. If the Minister will not accept the amendment—if he will not, today, commit to negotiating with the companies to get back the money that hospitals, schools and councils throughout the country that are going bust urgently need—he has to explain how he will get us a better deal on the existing contracts.

I put the Minister on notice. It may be that that we cannot tear up the contracts, but a Labour Government would get those companies around the table and make sure that they paid their dues. We would make sure that the excessive profits are brought back, so that teachers and workers and we won again. It is important that individual Members of Parliament have a great opportunity to go out and create change in their areas, if there are specific issues.

I published all those results in The Daily Telegraph and on a website. This was all before tax evasion and tax transparency became far more fashionable. The Government got involved and I am very pleased that as a result, £160 billion has been raised since 2010 in additional tax revenue, tackling avoidance, evasion and non-compliance. For me, that is an additional £160 billion that has been invested in my local and national health service, and in my hospital that has been rebuilt and paid for by the Government, not by outside organisations or PFI. That money is being invested in children’s futures in my constituency. Individual Members of Parliament have a great opportunity to go out and create change in their areas, if there are specific issues that they can tackle, and it is possible to win on those issues.

Kirsty Blackman: I think that I was as surprised as you were, Madam Deputy Speaker, by the brevity of the speech by the hon. Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland). I very much appreciate it—it is great. I was willing the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) to keep going for an extra 30 seconds to hit the half-hour mark. He was close, but did not quite get there.

I want to talk specifically about the bank levy, tax avoidance and evasion, and, briefly, PFI. We will support the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I will not expand on that because she covered the issue broadly. On the bank levy, the position in our 2017 manifesto was that we did not support the reductions in the bank levy; we supported the reversal of those reductions. What the Labour party has proposed is a good way to tackle this, given, as has been said in exchanges across the House, that there is
not an amendment of the law resolution, nor are we able to move some of the more exciting, more interesting things that we would have liked to move. I hope that the next time there is a Finance Bill, the Government choose to do that, and if we end up with the Labour party in charge, I hope that it will make that change and ensure that an amendment of the law resolution comes through in any Budget process and Finance Bill. That is the only way in which we can have a reasonable level of discussion on this issue.

5 pm

As I said, we oppose the reductions in the bank levy. New clause 3, which would tackle this, is the most sensible approach for the Opposition, constrained as we are in this debate. It is about looking at the effectiveness of the bank levy, how much money it brings in and whether there are opportunities to do different things that could bring in more money for the Treasury. We are in a strange position. It was funny to hear people talking about the City. When I speak to people in the City, it seems to me, as a fairly left-wing person in the SNP, that my views accord pretty closely with some of the City right now, whereas most of them are incredibly upset about Brexit. I feel that I have more in common with them than ever before, whereas the Conservatives have less in common with them at the moment, given how upset the City is about the issues thrown up by Brexit. It is a very strange dystopian situation right now.

On tax avoidance and evasion, following on from the work of my colleague Roger Mullin, I have mentioned before, and will not stop mentioning, the issue of Scottish limited partnerships. It was welcome that the Government took action and carried out a review of SLPs, but we have yet to see any solid action coming out of that. It would be useful to know when the SLPs will be clamped down on and that loophole closed so that people cannot abuse the SLPs. It would be useful to see that coming forward.

On more creative solutions, the SNP has consistently called for rules around tax avoidance and evasion to be devolved to Scotland. We think we would do it better—we think we would do everything better, if it were devolved to Scotland. Specifically on this, however, our Government have been recognised for the action they have taken through their general anti-avoidance rule, which is stronger than that which is in place down here. We feel we would be in a better position to tackle tax avoidance and evasion were it devolved to Scotland, and we will not stop calling for that.

On the reduction in the tax gap, the hon. Member for Croydon South talked about fairness and how the situation was perhaps fairer than ever, but the point we will continue to make is that, if there is any tax gap, the system is not fair. If, for example, we do not have enough customs officers to make all the necessary checks, people will be able to avoid tax just because there are not enough customs checks. Going forward, this will be a problem. Any tax gap, no matter how it compares with other countries, is a problem. On the issue of comparisons with other countries, a Credit Suisse report in 2014 showed that smaller countries tended to have smaller tax gaps because they were better able to crack down on tax avoidance and to police things coming in and out and so prevent tax avoidance and evasion. That is just another point in the case for Scottish independence.

On that basis, if the Labour party presses new clause 3, we will support it. As I said, we will also support the hon. Member for Walthamstow. I will not speak for much longer, as my points have been made in previous debates, except to say that we support making more changes to crack down on tax avoidance and evasion and to undo the changes to the bank levy.

Rachel Maclean: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and the other contributors.

I will keep my remarks short as many of my points I wish to make have already been made by colleagues. I want to bust the myth that we on the Conservative Benches are friends of nefarious bankers and bad people trying to swindle money out of the honest taxpayer. Nothing could be further from the truth. We on these Benches want a healthy financial system underpinned by banks, and we want those banks to contribute fairly, as they can and must, and as they have been doing under this Government. The facts speak for themselves, as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) set out.

We have set out a plan to raise an additional £9 billion by 2022—a significant contribution to the Exchequer that will help to fund the public services on which people rely. The banks are making money out of businesses in this country. They need to make a return—they need to contribute fairly—and the Bill will ensure that that happens.

When Labour Members start to attack us and our policies, they need to look at themselves in the mirror. They need to bear in mind the number of times they voted against the introduction of corporation tax and bank levy measures which, as we have seen, have raised money from the banks. Theirs was the party that allowed the Mayfair loophole to develop, so that hedge fund managers were getting away with not paying tax while their cleaners were paying it. I remind the House that it was this Chancellor, in this Budget, who imposed a tax on private jets. Could any measure indicate more strongly that the Conservatives believe in fairness and taxing the proceeds of profit in the right way to fund our public services?

The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) said that the banks were not making a fair contribution. I completely disagree with that narrative and that agenda. The banks are making a fair contribution.

Peter Dowd: When I have made statements and I have been wrong, I do not mind people bringing that to my attention, but I did not say that the banks were not making a fair contribution. We were talking about a fairer contribution in the context of the Government’s own definition of what they should be doing. That is the point. The hon. Lady should have a look at the work. She should have a look at the book. She should do her research, and then make an accusation.

Rachel Maclean: I am not making an accusation at all. I apologise if I have misrepresented the hon. Gentleman. I merely wish to make the point that I believe that banks must make a fair contribution, and that the Bill will enable them to do so. Through measures that we have introduced since we have been in government, £160 billion has been raised for the Exchequer.

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The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) is very well informed. I recognise the hard work that she has done, and I share a number of her concerns about the private finance initiative. A hospital in Worcester serves my constituents in Redditch. It is in special measures, and it has a financial issue. All of us in Redditch are very worried about that. I do not think that the new clause is the right way of dealing with the situation, but I should like to know what action the Minister will take to reassure my constituents that no one is reaping profits that they should not be reaping.

May I ask the hon. Member for Walthamstow to clarify the position of Labour Front Benchers? Do they not intend to take all the PFI contracts back into public ownership? She said that it would cost £220 billion, but I believe that that is the official position of the Labour party. It is a little confusing. It is difficult to know what the Labour party supports—whether it is the proposals of the hon. Lady or those of the Leader of the Opposition—so some clarity would be welcome.

Coming to my final point, Brexit was mentioned earlier, and we heard remarks about Brexit and the Labour party’s position, with claims that somehow Brexit is damaging our economy. [Interruption.] Well, Brexit was mentioned in a sedentary intervention. In my experience, businesses fear the spectre of a Labour Government more than Brexit, as a Labour Government would damage jobs and business investment. That is what businesses are worried about.

Jonathan Reynolds: There must be an objective assessment, given the strength of the economic risk that we face from Brexit. In terms of financial services, Brexit could diminish market access; it could take it away and make a situation where there is not a legal right to do the kind of business that currently takes place within the United Kingdom. There is no comparison between that and differences of political opinion over policies, and the Government and Conservative Back Benchers must take the economic risks of Brexit seriously.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is right. The spectre of the Laffer curve raises its head yet again, but it is a fact that lowering the tax rate increases the tax take. That is a fact that we have observed time and time again, and it has benefitted our economy.

Anneliese Dodds: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Maclean: I am sorry, but I cannot take any more interventions, because time is short.

I hope that, when he winds up the debate, the Minister will touch on the important issues of cryptocurrencies and bitcoin which, I believe, are not currently covered by regulation. I think we would all like to be assured that the Treasury is ensuring that no loopholes can develop that might allow tax evasion and avoidance. There are some alarming reports of people being arrested for money-laundering billions of pounds by that means.

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Rachel Maclean: I can see that Madam Deputy Speaker is quite cross that we have moved off the point, so I return to the point that I do not support the new clause because I believe what the Government have put forward is already tackling the issues of tax avoidance and evasion, and those measures will ultimately benefit our economy and our constituents.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and I shall speak in support of amendments 1, 2, 3 and 4.

The PFI system is, as admirably demonstrated by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), not working and we need to change it. It is not right that half of the cost for PFI schemes are interest repayments and charges for local services, which are under desperate pressure at the moment.

In April 2016, 17 schools across Edinburgh were closed due to fears that the buildings were structurally unsafe. They included three primary and secondary schools in my constituency. All 17 schools were constructed under PPP and PFI initiatives. In Edinburgh West, Craigroyston Primary School, Craigmount High School and Royal High School all closed. Parents were left worried and frustrated. It is clear to me from what I have heard today and witnessed myself that there is now compelling evidence that the payday loan approach to building is costing us all dearly.

For years, councils in Scotland and across the UK had no choice but to use PPP or PFI agreements to fund capital projects. They now find themselves in the position that interest repayments and charges are detracting from service provision when they are already strapped for cash. This morning at an all-party group meeting I heard evidence of how palliative and end-of-life care for children is being affected by the lack of council funding, and how the integration of health and social care is being restricted. That is outrageous.

In Scotland, PPP and PFI contracts are largely the responsibility of the Scottish Government under devolved competences, but I cannot agree with the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) that if the Scottish Government took over it would automatically be better; the evidence we have in Scotland counters that argument.

While it would be illegitimate to forcibly take contracts back in-house, it is important that we redress the windfall profits handed to these companies by Tory corporation tax cuts. It is both legitimate and fair for a windfall tax to be imposed on those profits, because, as we have heard, that would hit these corporations where it would get their attention—in their profits.

I ask all Members to put the benefits that we need, and the cash injection we need for our local services across the UK, first on the list of priorities, and find whatever way possible either to get money back or impose a windfall tax on these corporations.

5.15 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Peter Dowd.

Peter Dowd: Very little that I have heard from the other side in this debate has convinced me that we should withdraw our new clause—
Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I beg the hon. Gentleman’s pardon. I have made a mistake, in that I thought the Minister had already addressed the House on this group. I also beg the Minister’s pardon.

Mel Stride: There was a ripple of dissatisfaction when you failed to call me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it was almost imperceptible. Thank you for correcting your error.

In this debate we have heard about a range of issues, including the changes the Finance Bill makes to the bank levy, the taxation of private finance initiatives, and tax avoidance and evasion. I will respond to each in turn, starting with the bank levy. Opposition Members have raised a number of objections to the changes to the levy made by the Finance Bill and to the Government’s broader approach to bank taxation. These are unjustified. The Government did not focus so much on the surcharge to banks that make an appropriate additional tax contribution, beyond that paid by other businesses, that reflects the unique risks they pose to the UK financial system and to the wider economy.

I shall address some of the arguments put forward by the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), which I felt focused far too much on the bank levy. It is indeed declining, but there is good reason for that. In 2015, when we took the relevant decisions on this, we recognised that the risks presented by our banks had eased quite considerably. Indeed, the Bank of England has recently carried out rigorous stress testing on the banks, and that was the first occasion on which not a single bank failed its stress test. That is indicative of the fact that one of the raisons d’être for the bank levy has started to recede. That is to say that the banks are less of a risk than they were before, and the charges on the assets and liabilities that they hold are therefore becoming less relevant. The hon. Gentleman did not focus so much to end up entirely focused on the surcharge to the banking tax, which came in from 1 January 2016 and which represents an additional 8% on the profitability of banks at the present time. Whereas corporations are paying 19%, we are now looking at a total rate of around 27% for banks.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the Minister for that explanation, but as we have said before, when we take both those measures together, we see that the reduction in the levy along with the surcharge results in a lower overall contribution over time. We have spelled out clearly in our previous debates that the overall amount coming from the banks is receding over time, even with the surcharge.

Mel Stride: That is not the case. I will explain some of the figures in a moment, but there are other elements that are not being taken into account. One is that the banks are not permitted to offset against their profits the PPI compensation payments. Also, they are now working to a more restrictive corporate interest restriction regime, under which they are allowed to roll forward only 25% of their interest chargeable to offset against profits. Taking all those measures together, we have raised some £44 billion more from the banks since 2010 than we would have done if we had treated them simply as any other corporate business.

Opposition Members have cited changes in revenue from the bank levy. They argue that this is declining, but it is misleading to consider bank levy changes in isolation when they form part of a set of wider changes to bank taxes announced in 2015 and 2016, including introducing the 8% surcharge. Overall, rather than reducing revenue, these tax changes are expected to raise £4.6 billion over the current forecast period. I think that the hon. Lady will be interested to hear that figure.

Anneliese Dodds: We have just looked at the projections up to 2022-23. For the current year, we see £3 billion coming in from the levy and £1.6 billion coming in from the surcharge. The projection for 2022-23 is £1.3 billion from the levy and £1.1 billion from the surcharge. That appears to be a significant reduction; in fact, it is almost half.

Mel Stride: Taking into account the respective changes, we will raise £4.6 billion over the forecast period as a consequence. My point is that it is simply not right to focus only on the declining part of the equation—the reduction in the banking levy charge—and not on the fact that we are raising more as a consequence of the 8% surcharge and the increased profitability of banks on our watch.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the Minister for his explanation, but my economic forecasters predict a growing deficit as a consequence of the surcharge as it is only $4.6 billion over the forecast period as a consequence. My point is that it is simply not right to focus only on the declining part of the equation—the reduction in the banking levy charge—and not on the fact that we are raising more as a consequence of the 8% surcharge and the increased profitability of banks on our watch.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the Minister for correcting his error.

Mel Stride: Perhaps we can get into the nitty-gritty of this offline.

The average revenue from the bank levy between its introduction in 2011 and 2015-16 was around £2.6 billion. As a result of this package, however, yield from the surcharge and the levy in 2022-23 is forecast to be £3.2 billion. By 2023, as I have said, we will have raised around £44 billion in additional bank taxes since the 2010 election.

Opposition Members have also suggested that our bank levy is set at a low level compared with other countries. In fact, not all financial centres have a bank levy. The USA, for example, chose not to introduce one at all, and while several EU countries introduced bank levies following the financial crisis, it is not possible to make direct comparisons between these levies as the rules for each are different.

We have heard the argument this afternoon that we should reintroduce a tax on bankers’ pay. One of the aims of the changes to bank taxation announced in 2015 and 2016 is to ensure a sustainable long-term basis for taxing banks, based on taxing bank profits and the bank levy. By contrast, the bank payroll tax referred to in new clause 3 was always intended as a one-off tax. Reintroducing it would be ineffective and unsustainable compared with the package of banking tax measures that we have introduced. Even the last Labour Chancellor pointed out that it could not be repeated without significant tax avoidance.

Opposition Members also propose that HMRC should publish a register of tax paid by individual banks under the levy. Taxpayer confidentiality is rightly a core principle for trust in our tax system and HMRC does not publish details of the amount of tax paid by any individual business. While the Government continue to consider measures to support transparency over businesses’ tax affairs, we must balance that with maintaining taxpayer confidentiality in order to maintain public confidence in our tax system.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the transparency that is being sought is down to the public, demanding it? After all
these years of difficulty, and at a time when so many communities face council tax increases of 5%, there seems to be an inherent unfairness in the tax system.

Mel Stride: I just do not accept that. This goes back to my point about the balance of measures that we are taking. The Opposition are understandably focusing on the bank levy, which is indeed declining over time, but I point to the additional 8% surcharge, which is 8% more on corporation tax than other non-banking businesses are expected to pay. As I have said, the banks are also not permitted to carry forward interest rate charges to the same degree as other businesses, and they are not allowed to offset against tax the compensation payments that they have been making. All those things add up to additional tax and by 2023 will have raised an extra £44 billion since 2010 compared with what would have been raised from non-banking businesses.

Matt Western: At the same time as corporation tax is being reduced overall—I accept the point about the bank surcharge—does the Minister not accept that we are seeing a significant increase in council tax for the public?

Mel Stride: As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) pointed out, as we have reduced the overall level of corporation tax from 28% to 19%—corporation tax, of course, applies to banks as it does to non-banking businesses—we have seen the tax take increase by some 50%. We have actually been raising more revenue as a consequence of those changes.

Finally, new clause 5 would require the Government to publish further analysis of the impact of the Bill’s bank levy re-scope. The Government have already published a detailed tax information and impact note on the proposed changes, and we have published information, certified by the OBR, on the overall Exchequer impact of the 2015 package of measures for banks. It is important to legislate for such changes now in order to give UK banks certainty on their tax position so that they can plan effectively for the future.

The changes in clause 33 and schedule 9 complete a package of measures that raises additional revenue from banks in a way that delivers a tax regime that is more sustainable, more aligned with regulation and more supportive of the competitiveness of UK financial services. We should pass them without amendment.

In her amendments, the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) calls for a windfall tax on private finance initiative companies. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland), who outlined his vigorous work in this area in support of his constituents.

There are approximately 700 operational projects that originated under the initial PFI, representing £60 billion in capital investment. The vast majority of those projects were signed between 1997 and the 2010—620, or 86%, of all PFI projects in the UK were signed under the last Labour Government.

This Government have taken action to ensure that PFI contracts deliver better value for money for the taxpayer. That is why in 2011 we introduced the operational public-private partnership efficiency programme, which has reported £2 billion of savings. Even where it is not possible to find savings in a project, we are working with Departments and procuring authorities to improve day-to-day effectiveness and management of contracts. We have also made improvements through PF2 to offer taxpayers better value for money on new projects.

The hon. Member for Walthamstow argues that a windfall tax on what she sees as the excess profits of PFI companies would help to fund public services; I am clear that it would not. A retrospective windfall tax would instead do damage to any private investment in public services and would tax local authorities and NHS trusts rather than the providers it is intended to target. Even aside from those flaws, her amendments would not work as she intends, and I will set out why in more detail.

First, a windfall tax would cost this and future Governments who try to sign contracts with businesses, whether in PFI or in another area. This country has a hard-won reputation for tax certainty, and that important principle would be undermined by a retrospective tax targeting businesses that have legitimately entered into a contract with the Government. There would be extra cost for the taxpayer whenever the Government next needed to engage the private sector.

Secondly, as the hon. Lady knows, PFI contracts—she said that she has read many—are long-term agreements that typically include anti-discriminatory clauses. This means that when legislation is passed that targets PFI companies without applying to similar projects undertaken by other companies, the tax owed can be recovered from the procuring authorities. A windfall tax would therefore only be a tax on local authorities, NHS trusts and Government Departments that hold such contracts, which I am sure is not the outcome she seeks.

Amendments 1 and 2 propose that the bank levy could be extended to PFI groups, but PFI groups are not banks. Instead, they borrow money to finance projects that can deduct against its taxable profits. The amendments propose modifying those rules by limiting the ability of corporate groups to carry forward and offset their unused interest allowance against future profits. The changes proposed in the amendments are deemed to be “excessive,” by reference to a statutory test. The changes proposed in the amendments would not work as she intends, and I will set out why in more detail.

The changes proposed by amendments 3 and 4 also would not work as a windfall tax. The last Finance Act introduced corporate interest restriction rules to limit the amount of interest expense that a corporate group can deduct against its taxable profits. The amendments propose modifying those rules by limiting the ability of corporate groups to carry forward and offset their unused interest allowance against future profits. The limitation would apply only where the group contains a PFI company that has previously made profits that are limited would not. A retrospective windfall tax on what she sees as the excess profits of PFI companies would help to fund public services; I am clear that it would not. A retrospective windfall tax would instead do damage to any private investment in public services and would tax local authorities and NHS trusts rather than the providers it is intended to target. Even aside from those flaws, her amendments would not work as she intends, and I will set out why in more detail.

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Peter Dowd: That response from the Minister had complacency running through it like a line through a stick of rock. It contained self-congratulation and a rejection of any suggestion of a review, in any area. Not only have the Government not allowed us to make any rejection of any suggestion of a review, in any area. Not only have the Government not allowed us to make any significant changes, but they are not even prepared to listen to our asking for reviews, such as that requested by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). It is unacceptable if the Government are not prepared even to go that far, having shackled us this far. That is disgraceful. The Government, in this Parliament, should be ashamed of themselves for shackling the Opposition to this degree. We will push the new clause to a vote.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 267, Noes 306.

Division No. 119

AYES

Byrne, Mr Liam
Cable, Mr Sir Vince
Cabinbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalamous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crasby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cr puddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet
Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Annellese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Fint, rh Caroline
Fynnn, Paul
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Frint, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Greenwood, Liian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holliem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keelley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laid, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart
C.
McDonnell, rh John
McGovern, Alison
Mchness, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Means, lan
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Morgan, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
O’Neill, Melanie
Onwuah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Pearce, Teresa
Pannicook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget

Noes

Abbott, Mr Rhona
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Amess, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Ballard, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard

[5.32 pm]
| Pidcock, Laura | Sobel, Alex |
| Platt, Jo | Spellar, rh John |
| Pollard, Luke | Stephens, Chris |
| Pound, Stephen | Stevens, Jo |
| Powell, Lucy | Stone, Jamie |
| Qureshi, Yasmin | Streeting, Wes |
| Rashid, Faisal | Sweeney, Mr Paul |
| Rayner, Angela | Swinson, Jo |
| Reed, Mr Steve | Tami, Mark |
| Reeves, Rachel | Thelwiss, Alison |
| Reynolds, Jonathan | Thomas, Gareth |
| Rimmer, Ms Marie | Thomas-Symonds, Nick |
| Robinson, Mr Geoffrey | Thornberry, rh Emily |
| Rodda, Matt | Timms, rh Stephen |
| Rowley, Danielle | Trickett, Jon |
| Ruane, Chris | Turner, Karl |
| Russell-Moyle, Lloyd | Twigg, Derek |
| Ryan, rh Joan | Twigg, Stephen |
| Saville Roberts, Liz | Twist, Liz |
| Shah, Naz | Umunna, Chuka |
| Sharma, Mr Virendra | Vaz, Valerie |
| Sheerman, Mr Barry | Walker, Thelma |
| Sher riff, Paula | West, Catherine |
| Siddiq, Tulip | Western, Matt |
| Skinner, Mr Dennis | Whitehead, Dr Alan |
| Slaughter, Andy | Whitfield, Martin |
| Smith, Ruth | Williams, Dr Paul |
| Smith, Angela | Wilson, Phil |
| Smith, Cat | Wishart, Pete |
| Smith, Eleanor | Yasin, Mohammad |
| Smith, Jeff | Zeichner, Daniel |

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

- Thangam Debbonaire and Nick Smith

**NOES**

- Burns, Conor
- Burt, rh Alistair
- Cairns, rh Alun
- Campbell, Mr Gregory
- Cartidge, James
- Cash, Sir William
- Caulfield, Maria
- Chalk, Alex
- Chishtih, Reham
- Chopra, Sir Christopher
- Churchill, Jo
- Clark, Colin
- Clark, rh Greg
- Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
- Clarke, Mr Simon
- Cleverly, James
- Coffey, Dr Thérèse
- Costa, Alberto
- Courts, Robert
- Cox, Mr Geoffrey
- Crabb, rh Stephen
- Crouch, Tracey
- Davies, Chris
- Davies, rh David T. C.
- Davies, Glyn
- Davies, Mims
- Davies, Philip
- Dinenage, Caroline
- Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
- Docherty, Leo
- Dodds, rh Nigel
- Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey
- Donelan, Michelle
- Double, Steve
- Dowden, Oliver
- Doyle-Price, Jackie
- Drax, Richard
- Duddridge, James
- Duguid, David
- Duncan, rh Sir Alan
- Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
- Dunne, Mr Philip
- Ellis, Michael
- Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
- Elphicke, Charlie
- Eustice, George
- Evans, Mr Nigel
- Evennett, rh David
- Fabricant, Michael
- Fallon, rh Sir Michael
- Fernandes, Suella
- Field, rh Mark
- Ford, Vicky
- Foster, Kevin
- Fox, rh Dr Liam
- Francois, rh Mr Mark
- Frazer, Lucy
- Freeman, George
- Freer, Mike
- Fysh, Mr Marcus
- Garnier, Mark
- Gauke, rh Mr David
- Ghani, Ms Nusrat
- Girvan, Paul
- Glen, John
- Goldsmith, Zac
- Goodwill, Mr Robert
- Gove, rh Michael
- Graham, Luke
- Graham, Richard
- Grant, Bill
- Grant, Mrs Helen
- Grayling, rh Chris
- Green, Chris
- Green, rh Damian
- Greening, rh Justine
- Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
- Griffiths, Andrew
- Gyimah, Mr Sam
- Hair, Kirstene
- Hallon, rh Robert
- Hall, Luke
- Hammond, rh Mr Philip
- Hammond, Stephen
- Hancock, rh Matt
- Hands, rh Greg
- Harper, rh Mr Mark
- Harrington, Richard
- Harris, Rebecca
- Harrison, Trudy
- Hart, Simon
- Hayes, rh Mr John
- Heald, rh Sir Oliver
- Heappey, James
- Heaton-Harris, Chris
- Heaton-Jones, Peter
- Henderson, Gordon
- Herbert, rh Nick
- Hinds, rh Damian
- Hoare, Simon
- Hollingbery, George
- Hollinsrake, Kevin
- Hollowbone, Mr Philip
- Holloway, Adam
- Howell, John
- Huddleston, Nigel
- Hughes, Eddie
- Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
- Hurd, rh Mr Nick
- Jack, Mr Alister
- James, Margot
- Javid, rh Saidj
- Jayajawedena, rh Mr Ranil
- Jenkin, Mr Bernard
- Jenkyns, Andrea
- Jennic, Robert
- Johnson, rh Boris
- Johnson, Dr Caroline
- Johnson, Gareth
- Johnson, Joseph
- Jones, Andrew
- Jones, rh Mr David
- Jones, Mr Marcus
- Kawczynski, Daniel
- Keegan, Gillian
- Kennedy, Seema
- Kerr, Stephen
- Knight, rh Sir Greg
- Knight, Julian
- Kwarteng, Kwasi
- Lamont, John
- Lancaster, rh Mark
- Latham, Mrs Pauline
- Leadsom, rh Andrea
- Lee, Dr Philip
- Lefroy, Jeremy
- Leigh, Sir Edward
- Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
- Lewer, Andrew
- Lewis, rh Brandon
- Lewis, rh Mr Julian
- Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
- Lidington, rh Mr David
- Little Pengelly, Emma
- Lopez, Julia
- Lopresti, Jack
- Lord, Mr Jonathan
- Mackinlay, Craig
- Maclean, Rachel
- Main, Mrs Anne
- Mak, Alan
- Malthouse, Kit
- Mann, Scott
- Masterton, Paul
- Maynard, Paul
- McCollough, rh Sir Patrick
- McPartland, Stephen
- McVey, rh Ms Esther
- Menzies, Mark
- Mercer, Johnny
- Memman, Huw
- Metcalfe, Stephen
- Miller, rh Ms Maria
- Mills, Nigel
- Milton, rh Anne
- Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
- Moore, Damien
- Mordaunt, rh Penny
- Morgan, rh Nicky
- Morris, Anne Marie
- Morris, David
- Morris, James
- Morton, Wendy
- Mundell, rh David
- Murray, Mrs Sheryll
- Mrriussen, Dr Andrew
Order, this day).

motion, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme

the commencement of proceedings on the programme

5.47 pm

Spelman, rh Dame Caroline

Soubry, rh Anna

Soames, rh Sir Nicholas

Smith, Royston

Smith, rh Julian

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Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debbonaire and Nick Smith

NOES
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey

Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyne, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Cragh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Mrs Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Prent Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howorth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keelley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Ali
Killeen Ged
Kinncoll, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Larmy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarty, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Millband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Morgan, Layla
Morgan, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Orn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Mrs Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Arrog, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berrym, rh Karen
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Tulley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

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NOES
Brereton, Jack
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Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
“(1) The Commissioners of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs shall undertake a review of the impact of the relief for first-time buyers introduced in Schedule 6ZA to FA 2003. The review shall consider, in particular, the effects of the relief on—

(a) the public revenue,

(b) house prices, and

(c) the supply of housing.”
(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay a copy of a report of the review under this section before the House of Commons no later than one calendar week prior to the date which he has set for his Autumn 2018 Budget Statement.”—(Anneliese Dodds.)

This new clause requires a review to be published prior to the Autumn 2018 Budget on the impact of the relief for first-time buyers, including its effects on house prices and on the supply of housing.

Brought up, and read the First time.

6 pm

Anneliese Dodds: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 8—Annual report on relief for first-time buyers—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must prepare and lay before the House of Commons a report for each relevant period on the operation of the relief for first-time buyers introduced in Schedule 6ZA to FA 2003 not less than three months after the end of the relevant period.

(2) The report shall include, in particular, information in respect of the relevant period on—

(a) the number of first-time buyers benefiting from the relief,
(b) the number of purchases benefiting from the relief,
(c) the average age of first-time buyers benefiting from the relief,
(d) the effects on the operation of the private rented sector,
(e) the effects on council housing and other social housing,
(f) the effects on the supply of affordable housing, and
(g) the effects on the operation of collective investment schemes under Part 17 of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000.

(3) For the purposes of this section, ‘relevant period’ means—

(a) the period from 22 November 2017 to 5 April 2018,
(b) each period of 12 months beginning on 6 April during which the relief is in effect, and
(c) the period beginning on 6 April and ending with the day on which the relief ceases to have effect.”

This new clause requires an annual report on the operation of the relief for first-time buyers, including information on the beneficiaries and effects on different aspects of housing supply.

New clause 2—Review of income tax revenue—

“(1) The Office for Budget Responsibility must review the revenue raised by the rates of income tax within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider revenue raised by the rates of income tax specified in sections 3 and 4.

(3) A review under this section must also consider the effect on revenue of raising each of the rates of income tax specified in sections 3 and 4 by one percentage point.

(4) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before the House of Commons the report of the review under this section as soon as practicable after its completion.”

This new clause provides for a review of the revenue raised at the rates of income tax specified by Clauses 3 and 4 of the Bill and the effect on revenue of raising each of those rates by one percentage point.

New clause 10—Review of retrospective VAT refunds for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Scottish Police Authority—

“(1) Within one month of this Act receiving Royal Assent, the Chancellor of the Exchequer shall commission a review of the potential consequences of allowing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Scottish Police Authority to claim VAT refunds under section 33 of VATA 1994 retrospective to the date of their establishment.

(2) The review shall consider—

(a) the administrative consequences of allowing retrospective claims, and
(b) the impact on revenue of allowing retrospective claims.

(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer shall lay the report of this review before the House of Commons within six months of this Act receiving Royal Assent.”

This new clause would require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to commission a review into what the potential consequences of allowing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Scottish Police Authority to make retrospective claims for VAT refunds would be.

New clause 11—Analysis of effect of income tax rates on incentives into employment—

“(1) The Office for Budget Responsibility must review the impact of the rates of income tax specified in sections 3 and 4 in accordance with this section within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider the impact of the rates of income tax specified in sections 3 and 4 on the incentives for individuals to seek employment, including—

(a) whether those rates create, or detract from, an incentive for those not employed to enter into employment,
(b) whether those rates create, or detract from, an incentive for those currently in employment entering into new employment at a different level of income, and
(c) to what degree those rates create, or detract from, any such incentive.

(3) A review under this section must also consider those rates in the context of—

(a) National Insurance contributions,
(b) tax credits, and
(c) social security benefits.

(4) A review under this section must give separate analyses in relation to the impact of the rates of income tax specified in sections 3 and 4 in different parts of the United Kingdom.

(5) In this section—

‘parts of the United Kingdom’ means—

(a) England,
(b) Scotland,
(c) Wales, and
(d) Northern Ireland.

(6) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before the House of Commons the report of the review under this section as soon as practicable after its completion.”

Government amendments 6 to 8.

Amendment 10, in clause 44, page 38, line 30, at end insert—

“(4A) In paragraph 1GE (higher rates of duty) after paragraph (3)(c) insert—

‘(d) the vehicle is not a taxi.

(3A) For the purposes of this paragraph, ‘taxi’ has the same meaning as in section 64 of the Transport Act 1989.’”

Amendment 11, page 39, line 1, after “section”, insert “(other than those made by subsection (4A))”.

Amendment 12, page 39, line 2, at end insert—

“(3A) For the purposes of this paragraph, ‘taxi’ has the same meaning as in section 64 of the Transport Act 1989.”

Amendment 13, in schedule 3, page 65, line 32, leave out from “and” to “or” in line 36 and insert “each of the conditions in subsection (1A) is met”.

Amendment 13, in schedule 3, page 65, line 32, leave out from “and” to “or” in line 36 and insert “each of the conditions in subsection (1A) is met”.
This amendment, together with Amendment 14, provides that a pension scheme cannot be de-registered on grounds of the dormancy of a single company within the scheme, but only if conditions are met in relation to the date of first registration and the trading status of participating companies.

Amendment 14, page 65, line 37, at end insert—

“(4A) In section 158 (grounds for de-registration), after subsection (1), insert—

(1A) The conditions in this subsection are that—

(a) the scheme was registered in the current tax year or in the six preceding tax years,

(b) no sponsoring employer in relation to the scheme is a body corporate that is actively trading at the time that withdrawal is being considered, and

(c) no sponsoring employer in relation to the scheme is a body corporate that was actively trading for a period of at least twenty four months.”

See explanatory statement for Amendment 13.

Government amendment 9.

Anneliese Dodds: With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will speak briefly to the SNP’s new clause 10 and to amendment 12, which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), both of which the Opposition support. I will then speak in more detail about our new clauses 7 and 8.

On new clause 10, Labour Members welcome the Government’s decision to allow the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Scottish Police Authority to claim retrospective VAT refunds. The measures in the new clause follow the Scottish Government’s decision in 2012 to establish a nationwide fire and rescue service for Scotland. The then Treasury Minister, who is now the Justice Secretary, wrote:

“Based on the information currently available it seems that, following the Scottish government’s planned reforms, neither the new police authority nor the fire and rescue service will be eligible for VAT refunds under Section 33 of the VAT Act 1994.”

As colleagues will know, that Government decision meant that the Scottish police and fire services lost out on VAT refunds worth more than £30 million, with the Scottish police losing out on about £26 million. To some extent, I would argue it was a sign of recklessness that, at a time of austerity, the Government effectively left Scottish firefighters and police officers to fend for themselves. While Labour Members welcome the Government’s change of heart, we recognise the need for a proper process covering retrospective claims for VAT refunds.

The review proposed by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) would ensure that the process for VAT refunds was transparent, and that the VAT claims of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Scottish Police Authority were properly refunded by the Government. The review would also ensure that such an ill-informed decision, backed up by insubstantial reasoning, would not be allowed to happen again. That is why we support the new clause.

Amendment 12 focuses on an issue that I raised in Committee: the fact that taxi drivers with a zero-emission capable vehicle will not be exempt from vehicle excise duty until next year. As we discussed in Committee—I am sure that the Minister remembers this—taxi drivers need to purchase their car over a long period due to its relatively high cost. In many areas of the country, taxi drivers are shifting to lower or zero-emission capable taxis. I asked the Minister whether further changes were needed to the Bill so that the take-up of zero-emission capable taxis would not be choked off. I was grateful to the Minister for stating that there would be a consultation on the new measures in the spring, but I do not know whether that consultation has yet begun, so perhaps the Minister will enlighten us on that point. In the meantime, it seems sensible, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North proposes, to prevent taxi drivers from taking a hit when they have taken an environmentally friendly choice, which has considerable financial consequences for them because the vehicles are more expensive than standard taxis.

I now come on to Labour’s new clauses 7 and 8, which would require a review of the proposed relief on stamp duty for first-time buyers, followed by an annual report on the policy’s effectiveness. The review and the report would consider the impact of the new measure on house prices and housing supply, and cover who benefits from the policy. The need for such reviews is very clear. The Office for Budget Responsibility’s assessment of the measure is set out in black and white: it is likely to increase prices by 0.3% and benefit a very small number of people. In its words, the main gainers from the new stamp duty policy are people who already own property, not first-time buyers. It added that some potential first-time buyers with smaller deposits might now be able to borrow a little more, therefore allowing them to buy properties that they otherwise could not afford, but that the process would be more expensive. That is in the context in which the average price of a home in England for first-time buyers has gone up by almost £40,000 since 2010. In fact, only about 3,500 additional homes are predicted to be sold as a result of the new incentive.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Has the hon. Lady spotted that house prices are now falling, notwithstanding the change?

Anneliese Dodds: I do not believe that that is uniform across the country. Of course there would be implications if there were very rapid changes. That would concern many people, but we feel that in this area, when it comes to the cost for first-time buyers, there has not been a significant change. If the right hon. Gentleman has evidence that there has been a change for first-time buyers, I would certainly like to see it. There might have been a change across the whole piece, but it certainly has not had an impact on first-time buyers who are trying to buy the lowest cost houses, as many are struggling more than ever before.

Labour Members say that the situation might be different if the measure was accompanied by others that promoted the production of genuinely affordable homes. As it stands, however, any additional homes—at least those promoted by any Government policy—will not be in place before the stamp duty cut takes place. The funding allocated in this regard is woefully inadequate. Our most recent debate about this matter in this Chamber revealed that the Government’s new housing infrastructure fund moneys, such as they are, will not start to come forward until 2019-20, which means that the £585 million cost of stamp duty cuts in 2018-19 will not be accompanied by housing infrastructure measures, and the same will be the case the following year. It is only two years later that extra money for the infrastructure fund will be forthcoming. In any case, that will amount to less than
half of what the public purse will have renounced that year because of the cut in stamp duty. It is extremely disturbing that the Government have chosen to plough ahead with this approach in the absence of measures to significantly boost supply.

I repeat the calls we made in previous debates on the Bill for the Government to come clean on the advice they received about this measure. What do the economists in the Treasury say about this approach in the absence of measures to substantially increase supply? Ministers can claim—we have heard this from the Chancellor—that the OBR has not taken the small clutch of housing measures in the Budget into account in its analysis, but most experts who have taken those very small changes into account concur with the OBR’s original assessment.

Was that also the case with Treasury officials? We in this House deserve to know, as do our constituents, particularly if they are faced with any rise in house prices for first-time buyers, as anticipated by the OBR. I point out that the Government’s own assessment of a previous stamp duty cut, again in the absence of measures to boost substantially the supply of affordable housing, indicated that that “the tax relief has not had a significant impact on improving affordability for first-time buyers.”

We also need to know the regional impact of the measure. As colleagues mentioned in our previous debate on this matter, the upper limit of £500,000 in high-cost areas and £300,000 elsewhere means that the change will not have a positive impact in huge swathes of the country, aside from reducing the revenue pot overall, with the result that other taxes on individuals and companies have to take up the slack, unless public services are to be cut further. For many people, home ownership is a distant dream when there is no way they can afford the necessary deposit. Today’s figures showing that real wages have fallen for the seventh month in a row should give us all pause for thought about whether the proposed measure is appropriate.

Helen Whately: It is difficult for first-time buyers in my area to afford a deposit and they welcome the help the Government are giving to increase their opportunities when they are competing against people who are selling properties and are therefore more able to afford a deposit. This sort of policy is therefore very welcome, and it goes hand in hand with measures to increase housing supply. We are seeing significant—and not necessarily popular—increases in the housing targets for areas such as my constituency, coupled with work to make sure that houses are built when planning permission has been granted. I therefore contest the hon. Lady’s remarks on that point.

Anneliese Dodds: In practice, most of the commentary that I have seen from experts and those working in the housing sector suggests that in areas where there is extreme competition between different types of buyer—for example, first-time buyers, those buying additional properties, investors, and those moving to a second or third property—such a measure may help initially, but the overall cost increase will also affect first-time buyers.

They will therefore be buying at a higher price, so most of the impact of the measure—as with previous stamp duty changes without a boost in supply—will help sellers, not buyers. That was the Conservative Government’s own assessment of the impact of their previous cut to stamp duty in the absence of additional measures to boost supply.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): The hon. Lady gave us a tour de force in the Public Bill Committee, but on the narrow point about the proposed changes’ impact on prices, the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Paul Johnson, said that although there may be an increase in the price faced by first-time buyers, “this does not mean first-time buyers are worse off as a result. They are in general better off. Instead of paying, say, £100,000 for £98,000 worth of house plus £2,000 of tax they might be paying £102,000 for £102,000 worth of house.”

What is her response to that point?

Anneliese Dodds: I am aware of what Mr Johnson said, but I think he has fallen into the trap of looking only at the impact of the change on an individual buyer and forgetting that it will have an impact on the housing market, particularly in areas where there is strong supply and strong demand, and where such a change is likely to push up prices. I agree with Mr Johnson on many things, but in this case, unfortunately, the context has been missed, and it is important that we bear it in mind.

Michelle Donelan (Chippingham) (Con): The evidence suggests that house prices are not increasing—in fact, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has echoed the point, saying that although there was scaremongering, the evidence suggests that prices are not rising.

Anneliese Dodds: I am sure the hon. Lady is well versed in the subject, but when it comes to the cost for first-time buyers, there has been an increase. That assertion is supported by the evidence, and that is exactly what we are concerned about. We need to take action. The Government often say they want to help first-time buyers, and I think it is important that we take them at their word. We should also look at what the OBR said in its assessment of the policy. Again, I go back to whether the Government received any advice about the likely impact of their policy. It is disappointing that we have not had any clarity on that matter.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I am struggling with the concept that a price that is available to a first-time buyer differs from the prices paid by anyone else. I can accept that there are segmented markets in which there might be a difference, but if prices are falling marginally, that will be to the benefit of all buyers, whether it is the first or the seventh time that they have bought a property.

6.15 pm

Anneliese Dodds: I am always delighted to hear from the right hon. Gentleman. It might be instructive for us to look at the shape of the market, and at which elements may be reducing in price and which may not. I have seen media coverage suggesting that any reduction seems to have been reversed recently. In any case, it appears that there might have been a price reduction in the highest-cost areas with the most expensive properties, but are those the properties that first-time buyers are likely to be considering unless they are incredibly well off? Some may well be, but most first-time buyers in this country are not looking to move into properties worth
multiples of a million pounds. They are looking to move into properties that are much more affordable, so the lack of Government action to help them is enormously disturbing. That is why we do not support this measure; others would have been more effective. In particular, we do not support the measure in the absence of action to boost the supply of affordable housing.

I should mention that the Government’s definition of affordable housing enables a home worth £400,000 to be classified as affordable. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House would not appreciate that definition of affordability.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) talked about constraints on supply, and she specifically mentioned dealing with land banking by property developers. They are often given planning permission but, because of their financial models, choose not to build for long periods of time. As the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) will know, we have proposals to punish developers that continue to work in such a way. What is Labour’s view about them?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for mentioning that. For some time, Labour has proposed changes in this area, but they were dismissed as “Venezuelan-style socialism,” which I think was the phrase that we heard from Government Members. We are concerned about this issue, but we are also concerned about matters in the planning system that the Government have not touched, such as the fact that the rules on viability put all the cards in the developers’ pockets. That means that, if someone wants to develop any social supply, there are pressures on the affordability of the rest of that development. We are very aware of that and have worked on it consistently. Sadly, we have not always been supported in that, but I am happy that the right hon. Gentleman has come on board with Labour policy, and that the Government have as well.

There is a general lack of measures and lack of action on other elements of the housing crisis, which is so problematic—the stamp duty change seems to be the only real, significant change in relation to housing policy. Sadly, all of us as Members are seeing the impact of the housing crisis in our postbag, in our surgeries and, very sadly, on many of our streets. Rough sleeping has more than doubled under the Conservatives. It is the No. 1 issue that is mentioned to me on the doorstep in my constituency. I am sure that is the case for many other urban MPs. Even those who do not see it in their constituency probably see it, sadly, when they come to work here. Of course, we had a terrible tragedy in that regard recently.

Mr Simon Clarke: Housing stress is a major driver of homelessness, the causes of which are very complex. Does the hon. Lady accept that the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 is major step in unlocking the resource that is required and in getting people to focus, crucially, on getting into a home, as the first step towards making a more lasting move forward in their lives?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I will come later to some of the other contributors to this problem, which are not dealt with in the Bill or the rest of the Budget. I would just say that, although we supported many of the principles in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, again the problem is that, while we can place new requirements and duties on local authorities, if we do not fund them or provide the supply of accommodation to discharge them, local authorities will end up having to make invidious choices between individuals, as my own local authority has discovered. There is support for the principle of the Act, but without the means to deliver it there is considerable concern.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, however, for focusing on that issue. His focus is not reflected, sadly, in the Budget or the Bill. We have only had mention of three small-scale pilots to help to deal with rough sleeping, which is woefully inadequate and no match for Labour’s commitment to a proper rough-sleeping strategy. Under Labour Governments, we had one of those and we got rough sleeping down and virtually eliminated it in many areas. We have also said that we would reserve 8,000 units for people with a history of rough sleeping.

The Government have a commitment to halving rough sleeping by 2022, but to do this they have to change their policies. There is huge uncertainty about the funding of supported housing, which has led to a reduction in investment in that area—unnecessarily—particularly following the negative lessons of the Supporting People funding: there was initially a ring fence, but then it was taken away. We hope that that will not happen with supported housing. We have also seen swinging cuts to council budgets in this area, which has meant that the county council in my area and many others will not be supporting any homelessness places, at least initially. Coupled with reductions in social security and mental health support, this has led to burgeoning numbers of people sleeping on our streets.

This is not just about rough sleeping; of course; it is also about homelessness generally. On housing provision, recent research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the Government are still failing to tackle the fundamental problems in our broken housing market, and it does not conclude that the stamp duty change will deal with those fundamental problems. For example, the Government promised to build 200,000 new cut-price starter homes in 2015. Three years on, not a single one has been built. Before Christmas Ministers said they would be working out the definition of “starter home”, so they do not even know what their policy is going to deliver. They have not even decided on their definitions, let alone delivered those starter homes. In contrast, Labour would commit to building 100,000 social and affordable homes a year, focus Help to Buy funding on first-time buyers on ordinary incomes and build 100,000 discounted first-buy homes.

Overall, the Government’s own figures speak for themselves. The number of home-owning households rose by 1 million under the last Labour Government but has fallen under the Conservatives.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Will the hon. Lady acknowledge that the fall in home ownership began under Labour in 2003?

Anneliese Dodds: I would accept that there have been changes from year to year in the overall level of home ownership, but the cumulative reduction in home ownership under Conservative Governments has been far more substantial. Across the piece, we saw that increase of 1 million—
Neil O’Brien rose—

Anneliese Dodds: No, I will not give way, because I think I have answered the point. As I say, it is very clear; the figures speak for themselves, very obviously, on this point. The point is particularly and disturbingly clear in relation to home ownership among under-45 households—so for younger people—where the number of homeowners has fallen by 1 million since 2010.

We had a debate earlier about home ownership, and the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) stated, “It’s not just about home ownership. We need to think about other areas as well”. That is absolutely right. We have 1.3 million additional private renters in this country. Many on the Opposition Benches would not necessarily see that as a terrific thing; we would see it as lots of people stuck in private rented accommodation who do not want to be there, and we do not see measures in the Budget or Bill to deal with that problem.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order.

Anneliese Dodds: If I can end—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Ah, I was about to draw to the hon. Lady’s attention the fact that we only have an hour for this debate, but she has already counted that.

Anneliese Dodds: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do beg your pardon.

Let me end by quoting, very briefly, what I think was a devastating assessment of this policy by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), because not every Member who is present now was present then. She said:

“what is really unpopular in our country is having to step over rough sleepers while walking home. What is really unpopular in our country is having to watch other parents taking paper into schools because our schools cannot even afford the basic necessities. And what is deeply unpopular in our country is watching the number of food banks grow because jobs do not pay enough.”

People will remember that while all that was going on, the Tories were busy cutting stamp duty for people who could afford to buy houses. I do not think they will ever forget that.”—[Official Report, 18 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 867.]

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The autumn Budget was a triumph for Scotland, and a vindication of the constructive approach of the Scottish Conservatives. I hope that members of the Scottish National party, and other Scottish MPs, will feel able to welcome and embrace it. Unfortunately, however, SNP Members appear to have learnt little. They created the mess and embrace it. Unfortunately, however, SNP Members and other Scottish MPs, will feel able to welcome the new clause 10. That is exactly what we are doing, and, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, that is exactly what the Scottish Conservative MPs pressed for from the Treasury.

Colin Clark: Whatever argument the hon. Gentleman may present about what happened in the past, is he saying that he does not believe that more money should be given to the Scottish police and fire services?

Alan Brown: That is exactly what we are doing, and, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, that is exactly what the Scottish Conservative MPs pressed for from the Treasury.

Colin Clark: That is exactly what we are doing, and, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, that is exactly what the Scottish Conservative MPs pressed for from the Treasury.

Alan Brown: If this was all the work of the Scottish Tory MPs, why is it that, when I have asked parliamentary questions to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Treasury has been unable to confirm that any meetings have taken place with any of the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues to formally discuss the VAT measure?

Colin Clark: I am afraid that there is photographic evidence, which my good friends Twittered at the time—not that I do Twitter—[HON. MEMBERS: “Tweet!”] I mean tweet. There is photographic evidence that we most certainly did meet the Chancellor to discuss the measure.

Alan Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Colin Clark: No. The hon. Gentleman has had his go.

The nationalists made a conscious decision. They were not short-changed, they were not unaware, and the money was not “stolen”. They must accept that culpability for the lost millions lies squarely with them. If they want to raise the money, they should take the responsibility and raise it themselves. I only hope that they do not do so by inflicting further punishment on Scottish taxpayers.

The poorly judged centralisation of Police Scotland is never far from the headlines, but the resignation of the chief constable and the delay in the pointless merger with the British Transport Police have brought it under a fresh spotlight in recent weeks. Surely now is the time for SNP Members, both here and in Holyrood, to stop manufacturing grievances from their own mistakes and join us in working constructively to make Scotland a better place. And they should start that process with a review of the structure of Police Scotland.

Wes Streeting: Amendments 10, 11 and 12 stand in my name and those of a number of Members on both sides of the House. They deal with the vehicle excise duty supplement, and, in particular, with how it applies to the new electric zero-emission taxis. I should probably declare an interest, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on taxis. I am delighted that the amendment carries not only cross-party support but support throughout the country: in inner and outer London, Brighton, Sheffield, Bradford, Exeter, Huddersfield, Cambridge, Stoke-on-Trent, Bedford, Cardiff, Chesterfield, Sunderland, Leeds and Rotherham. Sterling work has also been done by my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), not just in Committee but in presenting the same powerful case this afternoon. I hope that this is an issue on which we can find common cause with those on the Treasury Bench.

During the debate on the Budget and subsequently the Finance Bill, I welcomed the Chancellor’s announcement in the Budget to exempt zero emission-capable taxis from the vehicle excise duty supplement, but I also cautioned that that exemption would not kick in until mid-2019. Zero emission-capable taxis are already
available for sale and have already hit the streets of this city and others. This new generation of the iconic black taxi not only provides passengers with a new degree of comfort and great surroundings, including the ability to see the sights of London through the roof while driving around but, most significantly and pertinent for the purposes of this debate, it is environmentally friendly. Members on both sides of the House are increasingly aware of how difficult taxi drivers in this city and across the country are finding their trade in the face of aggressive, and in many cases unfair, competitive practices. The Government need to do all they can to stop that great iconic taxi being driven off the streets of this city and others.

6.30 pm

The Government announced significant changes to the VED banding structure in the emergency Budget of 2015, which came into force on 1 April 2017. Under those changes, drivers of the new electric taxi would not have to pay the standard rate of VED based on the vehicle’s CO₂ emissions. However, they would pay a supplement for expensive cars of £310 per year for the first five years as the taxi costs over £40,000. This means that drivers of the new zero emission-capable taxi will be stung for the supplement, to the tune of £1,550.

Grants from both the Government through the Office for Low Emission Vehicles and from Transport for London recognise the high costs of the zero emission-capable taxi and the risk that that stops drivers taking up this environmentally friendly vehicle. They have done so by offering grants of up to £7,500 off the taxi for the first 9,000 taxi drivers to buy it. The Government will claim back one fifth of these grants through the VED supplement change.

That reform was counterintuitive and clearly at odds with the Government’s intention to make VED fairer for motorists and to reflect improvements in new car CO₂ emissions. I welcome the fact that the Treasury has acknowledged that this was an “unintended consequence” of the VED reforms. In recognition of that, the Chancellor announced the change in the autumn Budget that I have mentioned, but it will not kick in until 2019. That is where these amendments come in.

Amendments 10, 11 and 12 are designed to bring forward the exemption for the new electric taxi to the day that this Bill is passed as an Act. That would show taxi drivers in this city and across the country a clear determination on the part of the Government to help them to drive more environmentally friendly vehicles, but also recognise the significant pressures that the taxi trade is under.

My amendments perhaps go further than the Chancellor’s statement in the Budget intended, in that they would apply to all taxis over the value of £40,000. I am happy to debate the merits of that position with the Minister, but I gently say to him, in the hope that we get movement from Ministers, that I have raised this point on the Floor of the House, it was raised in the Bill Committee, and I have raised it formally and informally with Ministers, and I hope the Minister will stand at the Dispatch Box today and give taxi drivers in my constituency, others across my city and across the country the good news that the Government need to do all they can to stop that great iconic taxi being driven off the streets of this city and others.

In so doing, they might be able to rebuild a bit of trust in the Conservative party among taxi drivers. It is clearly in my interests if the Government do not listen to a word I have said and continue to give taxi drivers in my constituency and across the country the impression that the Conservative party simply does not care. However, I know from talking to taxi drivers in my constituency and their families, and many others across the country, that unless we get this exemption through, they will not be able to afford to take up the zero emission-capable taxis. In fact, it is arguable that many of them will not be able to afford to do that anyway. I am less interested in the party politics of this debate, and far more interested in ensuring that the taxi drivers in my constituency, across my city and across the country get a fair hearing and a fair deal from this Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Can I just try to be helpful? I want to get as many speakers in as possible, and I also need to hear from the Scottish National party spokesperson, so I ask Members to try to keep it short, as at least six more people want to speak.

Neil O’Brien: I am pleased to speak in favour of the reforms to stamp duty for first-time buyers and to speak against the Opposition’s new clause. The changes to stamp duty mean that 95% of first-time buyers will pay less tax; in fact, 80% will pay no tax at all. First-time buyers will be getting a tax reduction of up to £5,000, which will be hugely welcomed by younger people in my constituency.

I support this reform for three reasons. The first is that it is part of a wider rebalancing of the tax system towards younger people and people who do not own a home of their own. In that context, it is worth thinking
about these measures alongside the measures that we took in 2015 to reform the tax treatment of buy-to-let and second homes. Those reforms increased stamp duty on the purchase of additional properties. So we have this reform, which supports first-time buyers, and we also have a set of reforms that improve fairness and reduce the demand for housing as an investment asset. Together, these reforms tilt the balance of the system towards younger people and first-time buyers. Dare I say that they are redistributive measures, and I am surprised that the Opposition are opposing them? Given that younger people are the most affected by our failure over a generation to build enough houses in this country, it is right that we should tilt the tax system towards them.

Earlier in this debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) offered the Minister a suggestion for a revenue raiser, and I wonder whether I could do the same thing. Perhaps we should go even further in rebalancing the tax system towards young people and consider further reform of the private residence relief. The Minister will recall that, in 2013, we changed the way in which the exemption worked to make the system fairer and to end some of the abuses that happened under Labour, and I encourage him to look again at this issue, particularly given that a number of other countries have tighter restrictions on that important exemption. Such a move would complement the 75 anti-tax avoidance measures that we have already taken, which have raised £160 billion for public services.

The second reason why I support these measures is that, as the Mirrlees review and many other economists have pointed out, stamp duty is fundamentally a bad tax that reduces mobility. Obviously, the Chancellor is unable to abolish it at this stage, given that we are still in the process of cleaning up the biggest deficit in this country’s entire peacetime history and the situation in which, disgracefully, the Government were borrowing a quarter of all the money being spent. None the less, we are making important progress on ending this bad tax. These changes follow the ending of the absurd slab system that Gordon Brown had built up and the £300 million tax cut that accompanied that. This further reduction in stamp duty land tax, this time for younger people, is hugely welcome, and I hope that the Treasury will continue to chop away at this bad tax.

The third reason why I support the measures is that, even as we bring about longer-term reforms to increase supply, they can provide immediate support for younger people and those who do not own their own property. I agree with the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) that we must have higher supply. France has been building roughly twice as many houses as this country since 1970, so its house prices have gone up half as fast.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but why are so many of the housing measures, including support for local authorities, being delayed for a year before being properly implemented?

Neil O’Brien: I am afraid that I am not entirely sure what the hon. Gentleman is driving at, and I am conscious of the time.

I support the measures before us because they will provide immediate benefit, and they form part of a wider strategy to support first-time buyers, including Help to Buy, which has helped 230,000 people to get a home of their own, the lifetime ISA, which gives people a 25% bonus as they save for a deposit, the huge support for shared ownership and new supply measures, such as the housing infrastructure fund and the huge increase in funding for affordable housing in the 2015 spending review. My younger constituents will warmly welcome the end of stamp duty for first-time buyers, as will many older constituents—parents and grandparents.

The hon. Member for Oxford East rather made the case against her own measures by drawing on the huge amount of published detail about and analysis of our proposals. I have in my hand the OBR’s estimate of residential SDLT elasticities, and it notes the significant degrees of uncertainty. The creation of the OBR was a welcome reform, because it makes things more transparent, and it is right that the OBR is cautious in its forecasts. We created the OBR because Gordon Brown fiddled the figures and changed the economic cycle and led us to disaster by doing so. It is also right to stress the uncertainty around such measures, because it is fundamentally difficult to model things in the housing market.

When we introduced the annual tax on unoccupied dwellings, which I am sure the hon. Lady supports, we raised four times more money than predicted, so things are difficult to predict. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) has already made the important point that even if we believe that the £5,000 would be entirely capitalised into the price of a house, my young constituents would be £5,000 better off as a result. In Harborough, Oadby and Wigston, that is still a significant sum of money, so I am hugely glad to be able to support these important reforms today and to oppose the Opposition’s amendments.

Kirsty Blackman: I rise to discuss new clause 10, tabled in my name and those of my SNP colleagues. Given that we are tight for time, I was tempted to make an incredibly short speech and just say, “Can you give us our money back, please? Thanks,” and then sit down, but I will expand on that a little.

Christine Jardine: Like other parties, the Liberal Democrats supported the SNP’s call for an exemption from VAT for emergency services. However, the SNP Scottish Government was warned that this would happen and chose to go ahead anyway, and we now have a police force that the public, many politicians and many members of the police are unhappy with. Would it not be better for the hon. Lady to plead with her colleagues in Holyrood to fix the problem, rather than try to divert attention on to something—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Time is short, and Members should not be taking advantage. I want to get the leader of the hon. Lady’s party in, but I will not be able to if we have interventions that are speeches.

Kirsty Blackman: I am actually going to talk about why we should be given the rebate and why what happened makes sense.
Scotland’s police and fire departments have been paying an annual charge of about £35 million a year in VAT, and we have repeatedly asked for those services to be excluded. The SNP has asked for it 140 times, and several other people have asked for it, too, and we have been given so many excuses why it could not be done. Murdo Fraser said that there was “no justification for a VAT refund.”—[Scottish Parliament Official Report, 31 October 2017; c. 77].

The Chancellor himself said that they would not be able to recover the VAT under EU law. However, the fair thing for the Government to do has always been to give police and fire services access to the VAT rebate. Highways England and the London Legacy Development Corporation have access to the rebate, and both are national organisations. Now, suddenly, the welcome decision has been taken to give us the rebate, but nothing has changed to cause that to happen. The situation is no different from what it was three years ago. The police and fire services are structured exactly the same as they were three years ago, yet somehow the Government have decided that we are now eligible for the rebate when previously we were not.

6.45 pm

The only fair thing to do—I encourage the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) actually to read the amendment, because it would not do what he suggests—is to have a review. The amendment asks the Government to look at the implications of giving us back the money that our police and fire services have claimed. This is absolutely a matter of fairness. The rebate should always have been available to the Scottish police and fire services. The money should always have been available, so that we could ensure that we had the best possible services and so that we could do things such as tackling the public sector pay cap within those services.

We are asking the Government to consider the consequence that would occur if the money were available to be claimed back retrospectively, and I contend that the consequences would be that we could spend more money on police and fire services in Scotland, we could counter this Government’s reduction in the block grant and things would be better for the police and fire services in Scotland. This is a matter of fairness. Nothing has changed except the Government’s position, and they should give us back the money that they have always owed us.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I rise to speak to new clause 7. There has been a failure of successive Governments to tackle the issues with our housing stock. Since the 1970s we have, on average, built 160,000 new homes a year in England, and the consensus is that we need to build between 225,000 and 275,000 homes a year to keep up with population growth, to keep up with an ageing population and to tackle years of under-supply. That is why I am pleased the Government are taking steps to address the situation through accelerated house building, resulting in an increase in supply of 217,000 houses in the past year.

Increased demand and an historic lack of supply have inevitably pushed prices up. On average, house prices have risen by 7% a year since 1980, but the rise is not uniform. Areas such as the south-east have suffered more than others, with a 369% increase in prices since 2005. I see that in my own family, with many of my young cousins in Knowsley buying a home in their 20s on average salaries, as their parents did before them, but that is not the case in the south-east and other parts of the country.

Large price hikes obviously affect young people more, as they are typically on lower incomes and struggle to raise the capital needed to save for a deposit. When I bought my first home in the mid-1990s, around 65% of my friends were doing the same, and we just earned average incomes. Now, less than 27% of 25 to 34-year-olds are home owners, and I would be willing to bet that not many of them are in Chichester, where the average house price is more than £365,000 and the average salary is just £25,000.

The point was highlighted to me by a young couple living in my constituency, whose high rental costs mean they are unable to make any substantial savings towards a deposit. They are grateful for the schemes introduced by the Government to help them save for a deposit. Changes to stamp duty will also help first-time buyers such as my constituents to reduce the savings needed to cover the cost of purchasing a home. They will no longer pay stamp duty on properties up to the threshold of £300,000, and only 5% of the cost over £300,000 on properties up to £500,000, so 80% of first-time buyers should pay no stamp duty at all. This policy removes one of the barriers to the housing market, and it will help to give people the opportunity to reach a dream that many of us achieved in our 20s and 30s.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I rise to speak to new clause 2 in my name and in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), and I will say a few words about amendments 13 and 14 to schedule 3 that address a technical point of some importance raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who regrets that he cannot be here to speak to the amendments himself.

New clause 2 would ask the Office for Budget Responsibility to produce an independent, verifiable, non-political estimate of the yield that could be obtained by adding 1p in the £1—a 1% increase—to the standard, higher and additional rates of income tax. We are doing this not to give the Treasury computer some exercise—I am sure that it gets plenty—but to produce an estimate that we can all subscribe to of the revenue base that would exist for an earmarked tax to finance the NHS. This Report stage is clearly not the place to debate the NHS, but I want to raise the basic principle of how the Treasury might finance it.

In the middle of last year, the chief executive of NHS England produced an estimate that about £6 billion was required to keep the NHS on a sustainable footing and to avoid a serious winter crisis—this was about £4 billion for the NHS itself and £2 billion for social care through local councils. In the event, the Treasury, in its November Budget came up with about £2 billion—we can argue about how much of that was real, but let us say it was £2 billion—but we had the winter crisis in any case, and it has been discussed here on many occasions. We have heard about the long trolley waits, the elderly people waiting in hospital for placements and the stress on staff. We hope the winter is now over, although we
cannot be absolutely certain of that. The issue I want to raise is how we prevent this situation from happening in the next financial year.

The proposal that we have an earmarked allocation of revenue from a small increase in income tax comes from a commission that my party set up, consisting of not just supporters but a lot of independent people with authority in the NHS. It includes the former chief executives of NHS England, of the Patients Association and of the Royal College of Nursing, and the former chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, among others of similar status. They argue that the only sensible, practical way now to prevent this endlessly recurring financial and then real crisis in the health service is to have a dedicated source of tax revenue.

There have traditionally been two objections to such a proposal, one of which was public opinion—the public do not like higher taxes—but the survey evidence from a big Sky poll some months ago suggested that if people were absolutely confident that the money would be allocated to the health service, about 70% of them would support such an income tax increase; other polls have suggested the same.

The second objection was a traditional Treasury one, which was that such an approach makes public spending and taxation more difficult to manage. I would cite as a counter to that the recent comments of the former head of the Treasury, Lord Macpherson, who presided over it in the five years when I was in the coalition Government. He is a massively impressive man. I confess that we did not always agree—he tended to regard public spending as some kind of disease—but none the less, he is a very authoritative source, and he appears to have been converted to the idea that such a measure is the only way in which the NHS can be put on a properly sustainable footing.

Looking ahead to the next financial year, which is what we are asking the Government to do, the question is: how are we going to avoid the kind of problems we have had this year? The first way is by the Government simply muddling through on their current spending assumptions, and probably in the next Budget, in the autumn, the Chancellor will come up with another autumn, the Chancellor will come up with another

The other alternative is to hope that there is some kind of advance payment of the “Brexit dividend”. I think that we are all familiar with these arguments about the £300 million a week that was supposed to come back—I think we have been promised £18 billion a year. We now know that this is almost entirely phoney and cannot be relied upon. Of course it was a gross, not a net, estimate, and we now know that we are going to pay out at least £40 billion. There will be continued annual payments through the transition period and possibly additional ad hoc payments on top of that.

Even on a fairly charitable view, we would be talking about five to six years before there is any dividend, and even that depends on a continued constant rate of growth. If growth slows down, as it almost certainly will post Brexit, this dividend may never appear. So if we cannot rely on a Brexit dividend and we are going to get past ad hoc financing, some new mechanism needs to be found, and the purpose of our new clause is to open up that discussion. I do not propose to press the new clause to a Division, but I am interested to hear how the Treasury currently regards earmarked taxation and whether its thinking has advanced in any way.

Finally, I wish to say a few words in support of the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland, one of whose constituents has raised a substantial point about an HMRC proposal in the Bill that relates to dormant companies and their pension funds. The proposal is that such schemes should be de-registered when the companies have become dormant. The reasoning behind it is perfectly sensible: some such funds have been used for scams, to the cost of the public and HMRC, so HMRC proposes to de-register them when such things happen.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland’s constituent has pointed out some unintended consequences of this apparently sensible proposal, one of which is that there are quite a lot of cases in which the pension funds of dormant companies have been taken over by other companies. There are other cases in which a sponsoring company may be dormant but the trustees have kept it going on a pay-in basis, and it is perfectly sustainable.

The other aspect of the proposal that potentially causes a problem is that de-registration could happen after a closure of one month. A good recent example would be Monarch airlines. As we all know, it takes a lot more than a month to wind up a pension scheme, so it is a bit pre-emptory. I do recognise, as does my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland’s constituent, that the power for HMRC would be discretionary. The Minister may say that we should trust HMRC always to get these things right, but it may be more sensible, as amendments 13 and 14 suggest, to have a carve-out to deal with cases that clearly do not fall within its remit.

The purpose of the amendments is to suggest that the de-registration activities should be restricted to the most recent six years, because that is when the scams have occurred and we do not need to go back into history. There should be a specific carve-out for cases in which there may well have been a pension fund succession. The provision would be that there should be at least one dormant employer and that a two-year period should be allowed for pension funds that have been maintained for a substantial time and are therefore clearly viable. Neither I nor my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland would pretend that those are necessarily the perfect solutions to the problem, but I hope the Minister will acknowledge that there is an issue and get the Treasury to reflect on it and perhaps come up with a superior solution.

Mel Stride: Given the limited time remaining, I intend to focus most of my remarks on the amendments and new clauses that have been spoken to in this debate.

I shall begin with new clauses 7 and 8, which seek reviews of the operation of the SDLT exemption for first-time buyers. As we know, housing is one of the great challenges of our age. We all recognise—we certainly have done in this debate—the importance of the supply side, which is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, whom I am delighted to see on the Treasury Bench, made such important announcements about funding for more housing. We can now look at hitting 300,000 new build homes in the next decade. The point was
made that the OBR suggested that prices may increase by 0.3% as a result of our SDLT measure, but that observation is based on that measure alone and does not take into account the supply-side measures we are introducing.

Amendments 10, 11 and 12 relate to taxis and the vehicle excise duty supplement.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I wonder whether I might make a suggestion on the amendments to which my right hon. Friend just referred. Cabbies in my constituency have raised legitimate concerns about vehicle excise duty. If I have read them correctly, it seems that the amendments that have been tabled to clause 44 would make all taxis exempt from certain vehicle excise duty rates this year, rather than just the new, electric-capable vehicles. As my right hon. Friend knows from our discussions about taxis, I and other London Conservative MPs have serious concerns about air quality in the capital, so I would appreciate his view on whether it would instead be better if we brought forward by a year—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Sit, please. In fairness to the Minister, he has a very short time in which to speak. By all means make an intervention to get on the record, but please do not try to make a speech on an intervention.

7 pm

Mel Stride: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. In response to my hon. Friend—

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mel Stride: I will give way very quickly to my hon. Friend.

Mark Pawsey: On behalf of 1,000 skilled workers at the London Electric Vehicle plant in my constituency, will my right hon. Friend look very carefully at the proposals to bring forward the exemption on electric vehicles?

Mel Stride: If we look at bringing forward this exemption, the important thing is that we should look solely at that element that relates to low-emission vehicles, rather than applying it to all taxis, as indeed amendments 10, 11 and 12 do, as tabled by the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). However, having listened to the representations from my hon. Friends the Members for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) and for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) and indeed from the hon. Gentleman who has tabled the amendments, we are minded to look sympathetically at bringing forward the exemption by a year for those taxis that have low emissions, albeit that they cost £40,000 or more. I know that my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary will shortly be meeting representatives from the London Taxi Company and that he will be furthering those discussions with them.

In the one minute remaining, perhaps I could turn to new clause 10, which calls for a review of the consequences of not backdating the refund of VAT in respect of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. The Chancellor made it clear in the Budget that, after lobbying from our Conservative colleagues in particular, we would allow such refunds going forward. In 2012, when the Scottish Government entered into those arrangements, they did so knowing what the VAT consequences would be, but we are taking action going forward.

Finally, I understand the desire of the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) to have information on the effects of increases of income tax by 1%. However, there is no need for that now, as information is available on that. Time does not allow me to explain what that is, but I will speak to him after this debate, and on that basis, I hope that he will not press his amendment. I also take on board his comments about dormant companies and pension fund arrangements, but we do have to look to HMRC to make those judgments so that we ensure that these scams are prevented.

Anneliese Dodds: We have no time left, so I will press new clause 7 to a Division.

Question put. That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 228, Noes 305.

Division No. 121]

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Alexander, Heidi  
Ali, Rushanara  
Amesbury, Mike  
Antoniazzi, Tonya  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
Brake, rh Tom  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bryant, Chris  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Burden, Richard  
Burgon, Richard  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cable, rh Sir Vince  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Carden, Dan  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Jenny  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Coaker, Vernon  
Cooper, Julie  
Cooper, Rosie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Sir David  
Creagh, Mary  
Creasy, Stella  
Craddes, Jon  
Cryer, John  
Cummings, Judith  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Dakin, Nic  
David, Wayne  
Davies, Geraint  
De Cordova, Marsh  
Dent Coad, Emma  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet  
Singh  
Dodds, Anneliese  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Peter  
Drew, Dr David  
Dromey, Jack  
Duffield, Rosie  
Eagle, Ms Angela  
Eagle, Maria  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Efford, Clive  
Ellman, Mrs Louise  
Elmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
Field, rh Frank  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Frith, James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gaffney, Hugh  
Gapes, Mike  
Gardiner, Barry  
George, Ruth  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Glindon, Mary  
Goodman, Helen  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Greenwood, Margaret  
Griffith, Nia  
Grogan, John  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Haigh, Louise  
Hanson, rh David  
Hardy, Emma  
Harri, Carolyn  
Hayes, Helen  
Healey, rh John  
Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
P.
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virenda
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
 Siddiq, Tulp
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debbonaire and Nick Smith

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Arag, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Bradley, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caffield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clevery, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Dorelanto, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie

NOES
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evernett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollows, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
(2) The review shall consider—
(a) the administrative consequences of allowing retrospective claims, and
(b) the impact on revenue of allowing retrospective claims.

(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer shall lay the report of this review before the House of Commons within six months of this Act receiving Royal Assent.

This new clause would require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to commission a review into what the potential consequences of allowing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Scottish Police Authority to claim VAT refunds under section 33 of VATA 1994 retrospective to the date of their establishment.

The House divided:

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

New Clause 10

**REVIEWS OF RETROSPECTIVE VAT REFUNDS FOR THE SCOTTISH FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE AND THE SCOTTISH POLICE AUTHORITY**

‘(1) Within one month of this Act receiving Royal Assent, the Chancellor of the Exchequer shall commission a review of the potential consequences of allowing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Scottish Police Authority to claim VAT refunds under section 33 of VATA 1994 retrospective to the date of their establishment.

(2) The review shall consider—
(a) the administrative consequences of allowing retrospective claims, and
(b) the impact on revenue of allowing retrospective claims.

(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer shall lay the report of this review before the House of Commons within six months of this Act receiving Royal Assent.’

This new clause would require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to commission a review into what the potential consequences of allowing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Scottish Police Authority to make retrospective claims for VAT refunds would be.—[Kirsty Blackman]

Brought up.

**Question put.** That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 252, Noes 305.

**Division No. 122**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbott, rh Ms Diane</td>
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<td>Abrahams, Debbie</td>
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<td>Alexander, Heidi</td>
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<td>Ali, Rushanara</td>
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<td>Amesbury, Mike</td>
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<td>Ashworth, Jonathan</td>
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<td>Bailey, Mr Adrian</td>
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<td>Bardell, Hannah</td>
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<td>Barron, rh Sir Kevin</td>
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<td>Beckett, rh Margaret</td>
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<td>Benh, rh Hilary</td>
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<td>Betts, Mr Clive</td>
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<td>Black, Mhairi</td>
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<td>Blackford, rh Ian</td>
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<td>Blackman, Kirsty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blackman-Woods, Dr</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roberta</td>
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<td>Blomfield, Paul</td>
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<td>Brabin, Tracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben</td>
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<td>Brock, Deidre</td>
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<th>Tellers for the Ayes:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nigel Adams and</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amanda Milling</td>
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</tbody>
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**Question accordingly negatived.**

7.17 pm

More than five hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the programme motion, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burton, Richard
Byrne, rh Liam
Caddy, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Carden, Dan
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Champion, Douglas
Champion, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowen, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Many
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Beverley
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet
Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anne
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffy, Rosgie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gillett, Preet Kaur
Gilmore, Andy
Goodman, Helen
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollett, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leigh, Mrs Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lindon, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McGovern, Alison
Mclnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morriss, Graeme
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O'Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Philipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip
Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afrin, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vaz,ザー
Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherin
Western, Matt
Whitfield, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Brendan O'Hara and Patrick Grady

NOES

Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Breerton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Matt
Chishii, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
21 FEBRUARY 2018

Clause 9

Benefits in kind: diesel cars

Amendments made: 6, page 4, line 30, leave out from beginning to end of line 32 and insert “it does not meet the Euro 6d emissions standard.”
Amendment 7, page 4, line 38, leave out from “(2A)” to end of line 6 on page 5 and insert—

“A vehicle meets the Euro 6d emissions standard only if it is first registered on the basis of an EU certificate of conformity which indicates that the exhaust emission level is Euro 6d (and it does not meet that standard if it is first registered on the basis of an EU certificate of conformity which indicates that that level is Euro 6d-TEMP).”—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Clause 44

VED: rates for light passenger vehicles, light goods vehicles, motorcycles etc

Amendment made: 8, page 38, line 17, leave out from beginning to end of line 28 and insert “it does not meet the Euro 6d emissions standard.”

‘(5) A vehicle meets the Euro 6d emissions standard only if it is first registered on the basis of an EU certificate of conformity which indicates that the exhaust emission level is Euro 6d (and it does not meet that standard if it is first registered on the basis of an EU certificate of conformity which indicates that that level is Euro 6d-TEMP).”—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Amendment proposed: 10, page 38, line 30, at end insert—

‘(4A) In paragraph 1GE (higher rates of duty) after paragraph (3)(c) insert—

“(d) the vehicle is not a taxi.

(3A) For the purposes of this paragraph, “taxi” has the same meaning as in section 64 of the Transport Act 1980.”—(Wes Streeting.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 225, Noes 304.

Division No. 123] [7.31 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Amess, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, rh Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, rh Liam
Caddy, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy

Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruduas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nick
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fris, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Heppburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollen, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, rh Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Levis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Mailhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
O'Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan

Davies, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nick Smith and Thangam Debbonaire

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Breeraton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Connor
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverty, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims

Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margaret
Javid, rh Sahid
Jenkins, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczyński, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kenney, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Lewin, rh Sir Oliver
Lever, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Pitt, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Speakman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
The occupant of the Chair left the Chair to report the decision of the Committee (Standing Order No. 83 M (6)).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair; decision reported.

Third Reading

7.48 pm

Mel Stride: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Bill makes a number of vital changes to our tax system, helping people to buy their first homes, working towards improving productivity in our country, and making our tax system fairer and more sustainable. This Government believe in “a nation-wide property-owning democracy.”

That conviction is as strong now as it was when Anthony Eden first said those words in 1946, but it is obvious to all of us in the House that the ideal has been eroded, and that the next generation of potential homeowners are being shut out. In London, prices are nearly 13 times the average wage, and in the rest of England they are eight times the average wage. Home ownership has decreased by 20 percentage points among young people in just the last 15 years. This Government know that the most sustainable way to improve affordability is by increasing supply. That is why at the autumn Budget we took steps to address this. We announced the Letwin review to look at why planning permissions are not being completed, I will now suspend the House briefly in order to make a decision about certification. The Division bells will be rung for two minutes before the House resumes.

7.43 pm

Sitting Suspended

7.46 pm

On resuming—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I can now inform the House that I have completed certification of the Bill, as required by the Standing Order. I have confirmed the view expressed in the Speaker’s provisional certificate issued on 20 February. Copies of my final certificate will be made available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website.

Under Standing Order No. 83M, a consent motion is therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Copies of the motion are now available.

Does a Minister intend to move the consent motion?

The Vice-Chamberlain of Her Majesty’s Household (Chris Heaton-Harris) indicated assent.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) (Standing Order No. 83M).

7.47 pm

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I remind Members that if there is a Division, only Members representing constituencies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland may vote. As the knife has fallen, there can be no debate.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83M (5)).

That the Committee consents to the following certified clauses of, and schedules to, the Finance (No. 2) Bill:

Clause 3, 40 and 41 of, and Schedule 11 to, the Bill as amended in Public Bill Committee (Bill 151).—(Mel Stride.)

Question agreed to.
Buffini pointed out in the “Patient Capital Review”, it is often those companies at the forefront of technological and knowledge-based development with the most productive potential that struggle for necessary capital. In this Bill we are therefore increasing the lifetime investment limit for knowledge-intensive companies through our venture capital schemes from £5 million to £10 million, and we are doubling the yearly amount an investor can put into these schemes to £2 million, provided that everything over £1 million is invested in knowledge-intensive businesses. Building an economy fit for the future relies on our harnessing technology, new ideas, and the expertise we already have; these changes will help to make that happen.

The Government will continue to work relentlessly to make our tax system fairer and more sustainable, and this Bill continues the Government’s work on tax avoidance and evasion, making sure that people pay their fair share. Since 2010 the Government have introduced over 100 avoidance and evasion measures, which have helped to secure and protect over £175 billion of additional tax revenues to go towards our vital public services. But the work is not done, and this Bill furthers that agenda, cracking down on online VAT evasion, making online marketplaces jointly and severally liable for the unpaid VAT of their sellers, and preventing companies from claiming unfair tax relief on their intellectual property. Taken together, the measures in the Bill to tackle avoidance and evasion raise further vital funds for our public services.

I thank Members for the quality of the debate during the passage of this Bill, and I thank in particular the Bill Committee and those on the Opposition Front Benches, both Labour and Scottish National parties, for their professional scrutiny and the fair and effective way in which they conducted themselves.

This Bill is one of which this Government can be proud. It gives first-time buyers renewed hope of a place on the housing ladder, puts measures in place to boost productivity, and takes another step along the path towards an equitable and sustainable tax system. I commend the Bill to the House.

7.53 pm

Peter Dowd: The only thing I agree with the Minister about is that I too thank everyone who has taken part in the proceedings. The Bill is not up to the challenge. It contains nothing of substance on public services, on the productive investment that we need, on housing, on tax avoidance or on the scandal of private finance investments. It is an insubstantial Bill from an insubstantial Government, with more tax cuts for the richest. I shall sum up by saying that the Tory party is financially bankrupt in Northamptonshire and morally bankrupt in Westminster. That sums up this Bill, and we will vote against it.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 218.

Division No. 124

AYES

Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Beretson, Jack
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Doherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael

Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnero, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusratt
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heat-on-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollorange, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus

FALLS
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Lambert, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLaughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Ollford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pughslove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quine, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Ian
Stewart, Rory
Streete, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Robert
Throup, Maggie
Tohill, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, rh Shaiesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
Abbot, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fletcher, Colleen
Fiant, rh Caroline
Frith, James
Tellers for the Ayes: Craig Whittaker and Jo Churchill

NOES
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harri, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Heapburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilten, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, rh Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

**BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE**

**Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Orders Nos. 15 and 41A(3)).**

That, at this day's sitting, the Motion in the name of Secretary Chris Grayling relating to the Space Industry Bill [Lords], may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) will not apply.—(Amanda Milling)

Question agreed to.

**Space Industry Bill [Lords]**

8.6 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I beg to move,

That

1) a Message be sent to the Lords requesting that they will be pleased to return the Space Industry Bill [Lords] because the privilege amendment made to the Bill in the Lords was not removed in this House;

2) when the Bill has been returned by the Lords, it shall be further amended, in Clause 72, by leaving out subsection (2); and

3) when the Bill has been so further amended, it shall be returned to the Lords, with the Amendments made in this House.

I will not detain the House too long. Owing to an administrative error, the privilege amendment in clause 72(2) was not removed during our deliberations on the Bill. The privilege amendment was inserted in the House of Lords to ensure the provisions contained in the Bill do not infringe the privileges of this House, which is standard procedure.

The motion before us asks the Lords to briefly return the Space Industry Bill to the Commons to allow us to remove the privilege amendment. The amended Bill will then be sent back to the House of Lords, which will consider all the amendments made by the Commons.

I apologise on behalf of the Government that this administrative error occurred, and I hope that hon. and right hon. Members will support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

**Business without Debate**

**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 5 and 6 together.

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

That the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

That the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.—(Amanda Milling)

Question agreed to.

**SOCIAL SECURITY**

That the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

That the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.—(Amanda Milling)

Question agreed to.
UK Research Centre for Ceramics

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—[Amanda Milling.]

8.7 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am grateful to have secured this debate. This is an exciting time for the manufacturing industry, and particularly so for ceramics. In raising a debate on the Adjournment, I follow in the footsteps of Ida Copeland, my illustrious Conservative predecessor as a Member for Stoke-on-Trent, who in the 1930s handed a trunkey of ceramic ware around the Chamber and invited Members to guess which pieces were made authentically in Stoke-on-Trent and which were imported knock-offs.

I am sorry to say that I do not have a tray of chinaware for Members to inspect tonight, but that is because the goods I want to talk about have yet to be researched, designed, realised and put into production. It is also worth saying that not enough of the ceramics in our public buildings these days are actually made in Stoke-on-Trent.

It is true that British makers, our manufacturers, are leading the way in realising the new economic opportunities open to global Britain, with output and exports both on the rise. The Library informs me that the UK ceramics industry—in which I include the manufacture of refractory products and bricks, tiles and construction products in baked clay—contributed £824 million to our national economic output in 2016, up from £566 million in 2009. In real terms, the industry’s economic contribution has increased by 44% since 2009.

Meanwhile, according to the British Ceramics Confederation, the global market for ceramics totals more than $150 billion per annum. UK-based ceramics manufacturers’ exports have grown by 6% since 2011, to about £410 million in 2016. However, the BCC calculates that if the UK ceramics manufacturing sector is to maintain its share of the global market in the coming years, the industry’s sales must grow by 9% a year. Let me be clear: that is 9% growth just to stand still.

The sector’s ambition goes much further than just treading water in the international pool. It is confident that if we embrace the opportunities presented by the advance in technical ceramics, annual growth of 15% is possible, with an annual £1.5 billion of gross value added from ceramics possible by the mid-2020s. My ambition is to see £1 billion annual GVA from ceramics in Stoke-on-Trent alone.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his reference to the excellent work that the BCC does. In that same vein, will he put it on record this evening that, when we leave the EU, he will be supporting the efforts that Labour Members will be making when the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill comes back to this House to support the amendments coming from the BCC to protect those manufacturing bases from, as he says, cheap, knock-off imports?

Jack Brereton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. I agree that there is a need to ensure that our industries are protected, and the Trade Bill and the customs Bill, which he cited, provide an opportunity to do that. I would like to see a continuation of measures that we have seen in the EU—a continuation of those trade remedies that would ensure that the ceramics industry continued to receive those protections.

I wish to set out two key arguments. The first is that a UK research centre for ceramics is a vital addition to global Britain. The second is that, obviously, such a research centre should reside in the global home of ceramics, Stoke-on-Trent. Why do we need a research centre? For thousands of years, ceramics have been valued for their unique properties of durability, strength and resistance to corrosion. Thanks to hundreds of years of technological advances in ceramics manufacture, we now, regrettably, take for granted the affordability and ubiquity of ceramic products.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I asked the hon. Gentleman beforehand whether he would agree to my intervention. Does he agree that there is a need to keep alive the skills and the lessons he referred to, which have been handed down through generations, so as to ensure that those with an interest and desire to learn this beautiful, wonderful ability can access the tools and know-how to do so? Does he further agree that although it is wonderful to have the worldwide web at our fingertips and all the information it holds, there is something to be said for having the clay in your hands and the skills to mould it?

Jack Brereton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point and I totally agree that it is incredibly important that those skills come through. I have spoken to people from a number of businesses in my constituency, and they need more of those skills coming through, because we have the jobs and opportunities needed to absorb them. It is incredibly important, therefore, that we continue to see those skills coming through, and this research unit is part of that.

We are all familiar with household ceramic goods, both functional and ornamental, but the ceramics sector is much wider than just the market for household goods. Increasingly, advanced and technical ceramics are being used across the global economy: thermal barrier ceramic coating is used in jet engines; ceramic armour is used in the defence industry; ceramics are used in semiconductors needed in electronics; bio-ceramics are making important advances for the medical sector, in operations and, in particular, prosthetics; solid oxide fuel cells are radically benefiting the energy market; and in the world of digitalisation and virtual reality, the concrete reality of ceramics still reigns, including in digital printing materials. We need to make sure that global Britain leads this industry—that it is our nation and Stoke-on-Trent that harness the power of the 21st century ceramics revolution. Global Britain should not be saddled with a £900 million annual trade deficit in ceramics, given that the products we make are the best in the world.

A UK research centre for ceramics would be a magnet for research, skills and design talent. It would support and expedite the journey from inspiration and early-stage research, right through to fully commercialised products and processes. It would be the go-to place for firms seeking to source and exploit the latest ceramic technologies.

Currently, the UK lacks the R&D infrastructure for seamlessly researching and exploiting the range of novel sintering technologies. That cannot go on. Sintering is the process of using heat or pressure to compact materials
such as clay without the risk of liquefaction, which would destroy the material completely. It is a process that has long required a high level of expertise. Now, with advanced sintering—flash sintering—revolutionising the industry's ability to transform the properties of input materials, and using significantly less energy across the process, we stand at the threshold of a new era of high productivity and exceptionally fine goods.

To be globally competitive, we need to provide the environment to facilitate that process, not least in respect of Stoke-on-Trent's Lucideon, the development and commercialisation organisation that specialises in materials technologies and processes and is leading the sintering revolution. This is not about picking winners; it is about unlocking the doors for winners to walk through.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. As chair of the all-party group on ceramics, I think there is no more important issue to discuss in the House than the future of the sector—

Gareth Snell: Six hundred and forty people disagree.

Ruth Smeeth: Well, they are wrong!

What are the hon. Gentleman's views on celebrating the work that is already being done by the Ceramic Innovation Network, which is leading in this area? It is led by Lucideon, which is based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), and is supported by organisations such as Steelite, Churchill and Dudson—I have to get my local companies on the record—which secure more than 20,000 jobs in our great city.

Jack Brereton: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. As she says, the work that the industry is doing to ensure that the skills, technologies and advances we are seeing come through is critical. We need to continue that work and to do more to ensure that the whole industry is realising this technology revolution.

A UK research centre for ceramics would house an advanced ceramics campus, which would in turn house a national advanced sintering centre to bring together world-leading higher education institutions and industry, to create a hub for UK sintering R&D. That would deliver the step change that we need in the UK's research capacity for pioneering advanced ceramics.

A ceramics campus could also encapsulate the recently formed AMRICC—the Applied Materials Research, Innovation & Commercialisation Company—which envisages pilot lines in field-enhanced sintering, ceramic construction materials, combined process and product-batch trials, and mainstream ceramics sector processing techniques. The pilot lines are designed to boost productivity, commercialise research, encourage disruptive technologies and, at the same time, support decarbonisation through waste-heat capture and the electrification of the industry's considerable heat production.

A ceramics campus could be the new home for Lucideon, which is looking to expand considerably, aiming to nearly double its workforce. Together, the companies advocate the further development of specialist equipment and technicians for the benefit of the wider industry.

The ceramics campus would not be alone at the UK research centre for ceramics. It is envisaged that there would also be an international ceramics centre on the site—a hub for design, fine art and crafts, and for ceramics that would draw in designers, artists, architects and materials scientists from all over the world for expert training in the ceramics field. The ideas generated could be expected to provide some of the most eye-catching public art in history, making the research centre come alive for a much wider audience than just ceramics professionals. It would be an asset in the UK's business tourism offer and would complement the city's already blossoming tourism industry.

If the industry is to continue its current export success, it needs to be ready for the opportunities that will come from leaving the European Union and championing British products around the world. For this, a research centre could house an in-house ceramics sector expert in international trade. In addition, a facility for skills development, education, apprenticeships and training could keep UK ceramics internationally competitive and in high demand as the world-leader in products and technology. It is anticipated that as many as 600 people would find employment on the advanced ceramics campus directly, with several thousand jobs created in ceramics start-ups and spin-outs, and through the expansion of existing enterprises throughout the wider industry.

So why Stoke-on-Trent? It is the only natural home for a UK research centre for ceramics—it is the home of world ceramics and globally renowned potteries. Indeed, the plans and calculations for a research centre for ceramics are predicated on that centre being based on regenerated brownfield land in the city. The site would become a ceramics park, and would coincide with other developments that are coming to make Stoke-on-Trent a city that is truly on the up: development investment and civic renewal; a cultural renaissance including the British ceramics biennial; the BBC’s “Great Pottery Throw Down”; and our oh-so-nearly successful bid to be UK City of Culture in 2021.

Historic England has announced a heritage action zone in my constituency to enhance our local industrial heritage and give it a commercial future, particularly through gains from the visitor economy. Massive transport investment is planned, including HS2, roads, wider rail and the rebirth of our city's historic canal network.

No other city is better placed for access to the major cities of both the northern powerhouse and the Midlands engine, not to mention international markets, with four international airports within an hour's drive of the city. Both the BCC and Lucideon are already based in Stoke-on-Trent and, despite the truly shocking roll call of major names lost under the Blair and Brown years, the Potteries are still home to a huge number of world-leading brands in the industry, such as Steelite, Portmeirion, Burleigh, Wade, Dudson, Duchess, Churchill, Dunoon, Ibstock, Johnson Tiles, Emma Bridgewater and Wedgwood. Those are aside from the array of smaller-scale producers across the city tapping into and enhancing our identity as the place to be for ceramic artists and craftspeople.

The industry is also a massive draw to the city, with a burgeoning tourism sector focused around ceramics from the iconic Gladstone Victorian Pottery Museum to the award-winning World of Wedgwood, which I am pleased to inform the House has recently won the VisitEngland gold accolade. Stoke-on-Trent is home to the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, housing the world's largest collection of British ceramics.
Staffordshire University has a strong legacy with the institutions from which it was formed; the colleges of art, which came from across the Potteries, trained the likes of Clarice Cliff and Susie Cooper. The university has been awarded £200,000 to support growth and innovation in the ceramics industry from the Higher Education Funding Council for England catalyst fund. Partners include the BCC, AMRICC, Lucideon and Wade Ceramics. Although that goes a significant way, and there is much that our city can give, there is still much that our city needs in support. Our record on social mobility is not good enough, our educational outcomes lag behind, we are not yet matching the herculean efforts to improve, we still do not have enough of the high-skill, high-value jobs that a world manufacturing centre should enjoy.

Historically, the ceramics industry has provided women with opportunities that other industries have failed to provide. Today, the name of Emma Bridgewater is well known, and so too are the names of artists such as Anita Harris, Emma Bailey, Susan Rose and Denise O’Sullivan. Over the past century, there were many more famous woman potters, including Charlotte Rhead, Clarice Cliff, Edith Gater, Susie Cooper and more. We need to encourage more great names of the future. I am grateful to the Crafts Council for highlighting the fact that the numbers of students taking ceramics bachelor degree courses, and design and technology GCSEs, have reduced significantly in recent times. By enhancing and signposting the clear high-value career paths of the ceramics industry, it is hoped that a future ceramics park will encourage a much greater take-up of courses and get more of the skills that people need back into this growing sector.

As well as opening up careers for all in manufacturing and art and design, the ceramics industry offers career paths in everything from marketing to accountancy, and from information technology to customer services. It is, as the Ceramic Skills Academy says, an industry full of opportunity, and this fits very well with the industrial strategy.

I am particularly delighted to let the Minister know that the ambition for the UK’s research centre for ceramics, based in Stoke-on-Trent, has been tested against all 10 pillars of the Government’s modern industrial strategy. It will manifestly invest in science, develop skills and provide training opportunities. In terms of upgrading infrastructure, the ceramics park will convert a brownfield site into a thriving, publicly accessible research park. Businesses will be supported to grow and start up, ensuring that research and development is commercialised to the advantage of the UK firms on and off site. A research centre will help the industry to ensure that public sector procurement processes recognise the excellent benefits from UK-manufactured ceramics products. The ceramics park, equipped with an international trade expert, will encourage trade and inward investment. Through heat capture and other technologies, the park can deliver affordable energy and clean growth. It will be directly connected to the new district heating network.

The ceramics park will cultivate the UK’s ceramics sector and help to restore it to the health that it has previously enjoyed in some of the sub-sectors that have suffered acute decline. By strengthening the industrial cluster of ceramics in and around the Potteries, the ceramics park will be hugely beneficial in rebalancing our country’s economic geography. Finally, the ceramics park will bring together in one place the institutions and sectoral innovators that the UK’s ceramics sector needs to face the future as a dynamic contributor to a global Britain.

My appeal to the Minister is that he helps us to deliver this ambitious and exciting vision. In the short term, support is needed to develop and fully specify the proposals for the ceramics park in line with the process for similar centres of excellence supported by the Government. There will be a need for limited funding from Whitehall to support such things as infrastructure, but that will in turn leverage much greater investment locally and nationally from businesses, public bodies and academic institutions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) has previously corresponded with the Department about the early stages of this vision. I was delighted that a ministerial response in November last year spoke of “active consideration” and “an initial response”, assuring us that “it is pleasing to see the Ceramic Sector being so positive about the future opportunities.”

I would be grateful for an update on the Department’s welcome input and its intent.

I want Stoke-on-Trent to be a city for ideas, ambition and achievement. I want Stoke-on-Trent to enjoy a £1 billion a year ceramics economy, and for our visitor economy to be boosted with ceramics-related and ceramics-inspired tourism. It is a UK research centre for ceramics, based in Stoke-on-Trent, that can make my dream come true. It can unlock our true potential for innovation and success, giving us a competitive edge internationally. I look forward to the Minister’s support tonight.

8.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this debate. I congratulate other Stoke-on-Trent Members on their carefully crafted interventions, and I paid particular attention to the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ceramics. Despite various party political comments with which I could take umbrage, it is right that most of this discussion is really of a cross-party nature, and I shall attempt to respond to the debate in the same way. As far as my constituency is concerned, I suppose that the only interest I have to declare, without having a pottery, is that I do have Harry Potter—that is about the nearest to it. [Interruption.] Mr Deputy Speaker, you are not supposed to laugh at these jokes; Mr Speaker might get to hear.

The Potteries have made an enormous contribution to this country, but we should not simply recognise the ceramics sector for its role in the country’s industrial past, as it is very much a linchpin of today’s modern UK manufacturing economy. There is significant potential for it to increase its contribution to our industrial landscape. I accept—this point was very eloquently made by my hon. Friend—that we should be doing all we can to help the ceramics sector to continue to thrive and grow, because things move on.
Ceramics has become a vital part of the supply chain for a range of advanced manufacturing sectors, including electronics, aerospace, automotive and healthcare, so we do not take it as just one industry on its own. That is very important. I pay tribute to Laura Cohen who, if she is not here, I suspect is hiding somewhere. I was speaking outside the Chamber to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who remembers her very well from when he was in government, so he has a long memory. She is clearly a very effective lobbyist for the organisation that she works for, and I know we all respect that.

With regard to the industrial strategy and the ceramics sector, we know that just short of 9,000 people work in the ceramics sector in Stoke and Staffordshire—a concentration just over 22 times greater than the national average. The Government’s industrial strategy White Paper, which we published at the end of November last year, recognised the ceramics cluster based in north Staffordshire and the leadership shown by local partners across industry, education and local government in working together to target growth in this important sector. Clusters are a major contributor to growth. The McKinsey report commissioned by Centre for Cities identified 31 economically significant clusters in the UK. These clusters contain only 8% of the UK’s businesses but generate 20% of the country’s output. The Government are therefore committed to ensuring that the ceramics sector continues to go from strength to strength. The White Paper highlighted our ongoing support for sector deals.

Stakeholders have welcomed our proposals to extend this successful model of collaborative working on sectors. My job is to deal with most of those sectors and to encourage those that have not come forward with proposals to do so. A number of sectors have signalled their interest in developing a sector deal. I welcome the proposal from the ceramics sector for such a deal. My officials have provided initial feedback, and I know that the sector is responding positively. The White Paper sets out criteria that sectors should consider when formulating their proposals. We have to strike the right deal: one that is balanced between the asks of Government and the industry, and that is exactly what we want.

The ground work is already being done by companies such as Lucideon, based in Stoke-on-Trent, which is recognised the world over. It will be leading the research for the new Faraday Centre on the application of field-enhanced sintering of novel ceramic electrodes for a sodium battery alternative to lithium. Again, what is about ceramics, it has much wider aspects for big parts of the industrial sector. It is vital that we in the UK retain such expertise, and develop the future research and design talent that will ensure that we continue to lead the world.

The sector deal proposal from the ceramics sector sets out a compelling vision of how that might be achieved via an advanced ceramics campus. We welcome the proposal set out by the industry and are working closely with the sector to explore ways in which we can ensure that the sector continues to go from strength to strength.

I love the fact that the ceramics sector deal proposal has a strong place element. The industrial strategy White Paper recognised that while the UK has a rich heritage, with world-leading businesses located around our country, some places are not fulfilling their potential. We want to build on the strong foundations of our city, growth and devolution deals by introducing local industrial strategies. We want to introduce new policies to improve skills in all parts of the country and create more connected infrastructure.

Sector deals such as this, with a strong place-based focus, have a role to play in that. That is why the aim of this ambitious proposal is welcome. It rightly recognises the need to improve productivity by addressing the commercialisation of ideas, training and skills, science and technical innovation. It also recognises the role that culture can play in regeneration and local growth.

I end by reminding my hon. Friend that we are introducing a new £115 million a year Strength in Places fund to build excellence in research, development and innovation all the way across the UK. We are working closely to deliver that with Research England. I encourage the sector deal partners to consider bidding for that when it is launched.

I wish the ceramics sector the absolute best for the future, and not only for itself and locally, because all these different aspects of its development, as I have tried to explain, have really good implications for many other sectors. I am very happy to meet Members who have contributed to the debate, and particularly my hon. Friend, if I get the opportunity to do so.

Question put and agreed to.

8.36 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade Envoy Programme

1. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the trade envoy programme. [903859]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Prime Minister’s trade envoys do a great job engaging with countries where trade and investment opportunities have been identified. Last year, trade envoys helped contribute to export wins of more than £15.5 billion in their markets. Based on an outlay of just under £250,000 for the programme over the same period, each trade envoy, on average, supported £700 million in exports.

Chris Davies: Does my right hon. Friend plan to appoint any further trade envoys beyond those already appointed?

Dr Fox: That is the least disguised job application that I have heard in some time. There are 30 trade envoys covering 60 markets around the world. The programme is reviewed regularly in consultation with our overseas team and any new suggestions are put to the Prime Minister. I will let my hon. Friend know as soon as possible if any vacancies occur.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Before these trade envoys do anything else, will the Secretary of State bring them all together and allow them to have the same briefing from the CBI that many Members from all parties had this week? That CBI briefing on the impact of leaving the EU says that it will be a disaster for working men and women, industry and manufacturing up and down the country.

Dr Fox: As I often point out to the hon. Gentleman, the working men and women of his constituency had a very different view about the reasons for leaving the European Union. I make sure that our trade envoys get a much wider range of briefings than simply one—a highly suspect one in that case.

Mr Speaker: I call Mark Field—sorry, Mark Prisk. I beg your pardon.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): As the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Brazil, I have been immensely impressed by the UK companies already operating there, but frankly there are not enough of them. May I urge the Secretary of State to challenge business membership organisations, including the CBI, to ensure that they put exporting at the heart of their work?

Mr Speaker: There is more than one Field in the House, but there is only one Prisk.

Dr Fox: First, I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done. We have a growing and increasingly improving trade relationship with Brazil, but he is absolutely right that we require business to put exporting at its heart. The positive signs in recent times are that that is happening and we will export more than 30% of our GDP this year for the first time in a considerable while.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): What parliamentary scrutiny is there of this programme?

Dr Fox: There is cross-party ability to look at the programme. We have an International Trade Committee and questions in this House, and I have just reported to the House the value that we think the programme has.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As trade envoy to Ethiopia, last week I had a meeting at the African Union about the continental free trade area agreement, which is incredibly important for the future of all countries in Africa and for the United Kingdom. Does my right hon. Friend see roles for the trade envoy programme in engaging with these free trade areas, which cover more than one country?

Dr Fox: I would hope that our trade envoys, along with our posts in those various African countries, would understand the value that increased intra-African trade can bring both to those countries and in increased opportunities for UK exporters.

Exiting the EU: Trade Agreements

2. Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What estimate his Department has made of the number of new institutions required to replicate the terms of existing trade agreements with the EU after the UK leaves the EU. [903860]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The Government are committed to seeking continuity in our trading arrangements to minimise disruption to businesses, consumers and our trading partners. We will ensure that the institutional provisions of existing agreements are met as the UK begins to operate its independent trade policy.

Catherine West: What parliamentary shared goals do the Government have in mind for the new arrangements that will come into place?
Greg Hands: To be absolutely clear, if the hon. Lady is referring to the Trade Bill, what we are looking at is the transitioning of existing trading arrangements with the EU. All those agreements have already been through parliamentary scrutiny. If she is referring to future trade agreements, we will bring that subject back to this House in due course.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): One of the new institutions we shall need to set up as we leave the EU is a trade remedies authority. I recently travelled to Canada and the US with the International Trade Committee. They are two countries that have robust trade remedies authorities whose impartiality can be critical in reaching economically sound judgments. What assurances can the Minister offer the House that the UK Government are similarly committed to an independent TRA that will be free from undue political interference?

Greg Hands: I congratulate my hon. Friend and the other members of the Committee on their recent visit to the United States and Canada. Those are two of the countries whose trade remedy systems we have studied, along with Australia and, in fact, the European Union system itself. As my hon. Friend says, it is common, although not universal, for the investigation process to be independent of the Government, but there is still a political decision at the end of the process by a Minister who is accountable to Parliament. It is worth pointing out, by the way, that all the Opposition parties voted against the creation of the trade remedies authority in the first place.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I do not know whether a bridge counts as an institution, but I wonder whether the policy of the Department for International Trade, like that of the Foreign Office, is known whether a bridge counts as an institution, but I wonder whether the policy of the Department for International Trade, like that of the Foreign Office, is one of the new institutions we shall need to set up as we leave the EU is a trade remedies authority. I recently travelled to Canada and the US with the International Trade Committee. They are two countries that have robust trade remedies authorities whose impartiality can be critical in reaching economically sound judgments. What assurances can the Minister offer the House that the UK Government are similarly committed to an independent TRA that will be free from undue political interference?

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Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The EU does not have comprehensive free trade agreements with some of the world’s major economies. Does the Minister believe that the United Kingdom is likely to strike such deals more quickly than the European Union?

Greg Hands: We remain supportive of the European Union’s negotiations with some of those trade partners while we are still a member of the EU, because we are strong believers in free trade. We have also set up 14 trade working groups with many of the leading economies, including China, India and the United States, and we look forward to making further progress with those arrangements in due course.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Our current trading relationships with many partners ranging from Switzerland to Mexico are overseen by joint committees of the EU and those other states. Will the Minister tell us how many of the committees will be replaced by UK equivalents after Brexit, and what progress his Department has made in establishing those institutions? Will he also tell us where the staff and expertise will be sourced from, and at what cost to the taxpayer?

Greg Hands: Let me say first that the UK played a leading role in establishing the European Union arrangements with countries such as Mexico and Switzerland in the first place. As for the question of where we go from here, our priority is to maintain continuity in our trading relations, ensuring that all the 40-plus trading agreements we have with 70-plus countries become UK arrangements as we leave the European Union. The precise format of the further discussions that we will have with those partners will be a matter for future arrangements.

Exiting the EU: Trade Agreements

3. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Whether he plans to replicate the terms of EU free trade agreements in trade deals with Switzerland, Norway and Turkey after the UK has left the EU; and if he will make a statement.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): As we leave the EU, the Government intend as far as possible to maintain the effects of existing EU free trade agreements and other EU preferential arrangements. That includes agreements with Switzerland, Norway and Turkey.

Ruth Cadbury: I am going to pursue the questions asked by my hon. Friends the Members for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), which the Minister for Trade Policy did not answer. In 2016, the Secretary of State told the International Trade Committee that he would prioritise securing an agreement with Switzerland. The current relationship between the EU and Switzerland is overseen by some 20 joint committees. Very specifically, how many of those committees will be replaced by UK-Swiss committees, and how far along in the process of setting up those institutions is his Department?

Dr Fox: I met Swiss Ministers in Geneva recently, and we discussed what the future arrangement would be. Clearly, how we oversee the arrangement depends on what the arrangement itself is, and that is currently under negotiation.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We do not need trade agreements to trade, do we?

Dr Fox: No.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State has told us that he plans to replicate all the provisions of the trade agreements that the UK has, as a member of the EU, with Norway, Switzerland and Turkey. Those provisions include free movement of people in the cases of Norway and Switzerland, and a customs union with Turkey. Will the Secretary of State confirm that it is the Government’s policy to replicate all of them?
Dr Fox: In our transitional arrangements, we have made very clear that the key element is continuity. Until we create bespoke arrangements with those countries, we will maintain the provisions that exist today.

UK Trading Relations: Pacific Countries

4. Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen UK trading relations with Australia, New Zealand and other Commonwealth countries in the Pacific. [903862]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): We have the opportunity to enhance our global trading relationships, including those with the countries with which we share bonds of history and friendship. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State travelled to Australia and New Zealand in November to promote free trade and deepen those trading relationships. The April Commonwealth summit here in London will provide an opportunity for us to continue that work with all member states.

Colin Clark: Has my right hon. Friend considered how UK agriculture will compete with our Commonwealth cousins when we agree a free trade deal after leaving the customs union?

Greg Hands: I praise my hon. Friend for his distinguished business career in the sector before coming to this House; it means he brings real expertise to the House. He will know that we have established trade working groups with both Australia and New Zealand to explore possibilities in trade and investment. They will include agriculture, but it is too early to be sure how it will be covered in those and other future trading arrangements. The New Zealanders are very interested in this—the New Zealand High Commission recently wrote to the International Trade Committee saying:

“Given the complementarity of our two economies and our deep bilateral ties,” they want to do something with us, and we very much agree.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): On negotiations with New Zealand, the Minister will be aware that Wales has a large lamb industry—it is one of the great prides of the United Kingdom—so can he give an absolute assurance that in his negotiations with New Zealand he will not put any Welsh farms and the Welsh lamb industry at risk?

Greg Hands: I am keenly aware, as are my right hon. Friend the Secretaries of State for International Trade and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, of the importance of British agriculture in all parts of the United Kingdom and of making sure we have the necessary protections in place on animal welfare standards and so on, and also of promoting the opportunity to export our excellent British goods. Food and drink is one of our fastest-growing export sectors, and we want people to take advantage of opportunities across the UK.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): What importance does the Minister attach to deepening and broadening our trade relationships with countries such as India, which has a widening middle class among its population of 1.25 billion?

Greg Hands: The Prime Minister’s first bilateral trade visit in November 2016 was to India, accompanied by the Secretary of State and myself. We have recently completed a trade audit with India that looks at all the barriers. India is at times a difficult market for British exporters to crack. We have a lot of advantages in doing business there, and the trade audit and the joint economic trade committee talks led by the Secretary of State last month are taking us in the right direction.

Exiting the EU: UK Trade

5. Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on UK trade of the UK leaving the EU single market and the customs union. [903863]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): By leaving the customs union and establishing a new ambitious arrangement with the EU, we will be seeking to maintain as frictionless as possible trade in goods between the UK and the EU, and the freedom to forge trade relations with partners around the world.

Joanna Cherry: The Norwegians have a saying: “Nothing is in as much of a hurry as a dead fish on the back of a lorry.” Like Norway, Scotland exports most of the fish it catches to the EU, which is why Norway has chosen to be a member of the single market, in particular to avoid non-tariff barriers so the fish can cross borders quickly. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact of leaving the single market on the Scottish fishing industry?

Dr Fox: Of course, the majority of Scotland’s exports go to the rest of the UK, not the EU. The hon. and learned Lady talks about the value of the single market; it is just worth pointing out that, despite our membership of the single market, we have had a growing trade deficit with the EU at a time when we have had a growing trade surplus with the rest of the world. We want to establish the conditions for all our exports from all parts of the UK to be able to access the growing markets of the world, and, as the International Monetary Fund has pointed out, 90% of global growth in the next 10 to 15 years will be outside Europe.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State’s preferred method of ensuring frictionless trade between the Republic and the north of Ireland?

Dr Fox: Our preferred option is to do that through a widespread and liberal agreement in trade with the European Union, as set out in the Government’s memorandum in December.

GREAT Festival of Innovation

6. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What progress he has made on arrangements for the GREAT Festival of Innovation in Hong Kong planned for March 2018. [903864]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The GREAT festival will be held in Hong Kong from 21 to
24 March 2018. With more than 70 confirmed speakers, the festival will showcase the best of British innovation, the potential of the UK economy and the strength of our world-class service sector.

Alan Mak: Britain is becoming a world leader in artificial intelligence, big data and the fourth industrial revolution technologies that will power future export growth. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that those technologies will be widely promoted at next month’s festival?

Dr Fox: They will indeed be widely represented. For example, UtterBerry, an AI-based infrastructure monitoring technology that has been used in this country in projects such as the Thames tideway and Crossrail, will be showcased. The festival will be an opportunity for us to show off the best of British innovation in general.

Overseas Direct Investment

7. Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): What progress he has made on his Department’s overseas direct investment pilots?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): We are making great progress on supporting UK businesses to invest overseas, as this can have a substantial positive effect on the UK economy. The Department for International Trade has developed a suite of products and services that address market failures, to support British businesses.

Gillian Keegan: What update can the Minister provide on his Department’s overseas direct investment pilots? Will he also explain what opportunities ODI offers to British businesses?

Graham Stuart: My Department’s ODI support pilots have successfully demonstrated the impact that the Government can have in supporting UK businesses to overcome barriers to market access and to expand overseas. By harnessing the private sector wherever possible and focusing Government interventions only on market failures, my Department has successfully supported overseas investment for a range of UK businesses in six global markets.

Trade Deficit: Goods and Services

8. Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): What recent estimate he has made of the UK’s trade deficit in goods and services.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): In 2016, the UK had a trade deficit with the EU of £70.97 billion, and a trade surplus of £39 billion with non-EU countries, up from £33.6 billion in 2015. The latest trade figures show that in 2017, the UK’s trade deficit in goods and services narrowed by £7 billion to £33.7 billion.

Mr Hayes: Balance of trade figures were once regarded as pivotal. They were even thought to win or lose elections. Given that we are now going to escape from the constraining clutches of the European Union, will my right hon. Friend invest again in old friends and rejuvenate our relationships in the realm with allies such as Australia and New Zealand? What steps has he taken to ensure preferential arrangements with such old allies?

Greg Hands: My right hon. Friend asks a very good question. First, I should like to put on record my thanks to him for leading various Government trade delegations in recent years, including one to Colombia. I know that he takes a strong interest in this subject. As I said earlier, we have set up trade working groups with Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and, unlike Opposition Front Benchers, we also voted for the comprehensive economic and trade agreement, the EU’s free trade agreement with Canada. The Secretary of State has been in all four of those markets in the past year, leading efforts to break down trade barriers and to seek new trade agreements.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) enjoyed going to Colombia. Quite what Colombia made of the right hon. Gentleman is not recorded.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The creative sector in Bristol West—particularly the music industry—is important, and trade in that sector is a service industry. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the creative industries, particularly the music industry, are supported as we leave the EU?

Greg Hands: The hon. Lady is quite right to point out the importance of services to our trade. Overall, services represent 80% of our economy and 79% of jobs. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the whole team are working closely with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to ensure that we continue to grow exports from our creative sector and that investment from abroad continues to come into the sector. We often visit places such as Tech City UK and techUK, and we are working closely with them to ensure that we have a flourishing future for our creative industries.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Last week, as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Kosovo, I visited a British company in Pristina that has a £20 million investment there. What opportunities does the Minister foresee for widening our trade in goods and services with Kosovo and the neighbouring western Balkan countries?

Greg Hands: This is a very good opportunity. That is a part of the world that I know well, and I think that the company to which my hon. Friend refers is called Fox Marble—a highly appropriate name for this particular Question Time. It finds top-quality marble in Kosovo for export, and it should be congratulated. In regard to the wider region, we work closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to promote trading opportunities throughout the region.

Topical Questions

T1. [903914] Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.
The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): My Department has responsibility for export promotion, foreign and outward direct investment, and trade policy. I am delighted to inform the House that my Department has appointed the first three of our network of Her Majesty’s trade commissioners, and Richard Burn, Antony Phillipson and Crispin Simon will serve as trade commissioners for China, North America and south Asia respectively. They will develop and deliver strategies to ensure that we can take full advantage of leaving the European Union, the single market and the customs union.

Rehman Chishti: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. What evidence is he seeing for growth in UK manufacturing exports to the wider world? I have just returned from a visit to Pakistan with leading British companies in my role as trade envoy to enhance trading between our two great countries; will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to Elin Burns and Matt Lister, our trade experts in Pakistan?

Dr Fox: I pay tribute to all those people. We are seeing a big rise in our manufacturing order books, not least on the back of our strong export performance. In recent times, we have seen the biggest growth in consistent monthly manufacturing numbers for some 30 years. The figures produced by the Office for National Statistics suggest that our exports now represent 30.3% of our exported GDP—the second highest figure on record.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Given the Government Front-Bench team’s uncharacteristic failure to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) to the Opposition Front Bench, I know that you would want me to do so, Mr Speaker.

Is the Secretary of State aware that the Food Standards Agency recently detained large quantities of out-of-date meat in a company called Norish Cold Storage? The meat is believed to have come from Ireland and South America. Given that Norish is the parent company of Town View Foods, one of the directors of which, Plunkett Matthews, was also a director of Freeza Meats, a company implicated in the Irish horsemeat scandal in 2013 and found guilty of meat-labelling fraud, will the Secretary of State urgently liaise with Ministers in the Republic of Ireland, the FSA here and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland to ensure the supply chain for this illegal meat is identified, that our sanitary and phytosanitary regulations are properly enforced and that those behind the illegal trade—

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Gentleman that if the meat was previously hot, it would certainly be freezing cold by now.

Dr Fox: I was not aware of that particular allegation. This cross-Government issue is clearly not one entirely for my Department, but I will ensure that other Ministers are made aware of it.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Britain’s relationship with Israel is stronger than ever, with record levels of bilateral co-operation in trade, investment, science and technology. As my hon. Friend rightly says, the UK-Israel trade working group is making good progress in ensuring continuity in our trading relationships as we leave the EU.

T2. [903915] Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind the upcoming Israel Apartheid Week in universities, of which a boycott of Israel and its products is a big component, will the Minister outline how he intends to enhance trade with Israel for our mutual benefit and offset that destructive campaign by the anti-Israel movement?

Graham Stuart: We strongly welcome our ties with Israel, as does the hon. Gentleman. As has just been said, the Department has established a joint trade working group, and we continue to liaise closely with the Israeli Government to strengthen trade, investment and other ties between this country and Israel.

T4. [903917] Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Next Friday, I will be attending the COMBebusiness event, which showcases the brilliant small and medium-sized enterprises in north Devon. What is the Department doing to attract international investment to those businesses, which form the bedrock of the south-west’s economy?

Graham Stuart: We work in collaboration with the Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership to attract foreign direct investment into Devon. More widely, the Department works with local enterprise partnerships and local authorities across the south-west to promote inward investment opportunities to foreign-owned companies. In 2016-17, DIT recorded 101 inward investment projects in the south-west, creating 3,402 new jobs.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Although my party does not want to leave the single market or the customs union, a properly planned and managed transition period is always top of the agenda for businesses across Scotland, particularly in our thriving food and drink sector. Does the Secretary of State agree with his own Government that a sensible transition period is required, or is he sticking to his cliff-edge position, which will have a devastating impact for businesses across Scotland and the UK?

Dr Fox: We believe across Government that the simplest way to get to the position that we will be able to enjoy, of leaving the single market and the customs union, is via a transition period that is carefully planned and that gives predictability to business.

Several hon. Members: rose.

Mr Speaker: Single-sentence inquiries are now required.

T5. [903918] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Last week, I visited the US as part of a cross-party delegation to discuss the future of financial services, and I was very encouraged by the positive response from a variety of stakeholders. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the potential for a future UK trade deal with the US?
Dr Fox: We have four working groups with the United States at the present time, and at the last one we announced a UK-US small and medium-sized enterprise dialogue. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the first dialogue on SMEs will take place next month and will involve more than 100 businesses as part of a very constructive process.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Remoteness of location in the UK is no constraint on the success of some of our malt whisky distilleries in Scotland. Can I tempt the Secretary of State or his Ministers to come and visit Old Pulteney in Wick or Glenmorangie in Tain? Will they do everything to secure the future prosperity of the distilleries in my constituency?

Dr Fox: I already have several invitations to visit distilleries, and I intend to take a very close personal interest in this particular sector.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): Yes, my hon. Friend is right. I mentioned the India trade audit that has just been published. The Secretary of State met his Indian counterpart, Minister Prabhu, during our Joint Economic and Trade Committee meetings in January, and they agreed that bilateral work will now explore addressing barriers in four recommended sectors: food and drink, life sciences, information technology and services.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The UK remains a major transit hub for illegal wildlife trafficking, and we rely on Border Force to prevent that trade. Will the Minister tell his colleagues in the Home Office to ditch their dangerous plan to replace Border Force staff with volunteers?

Greg Hands: Actually, this Government have made enormous efforts to stop wildlife trafficking. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs made it a major part of his visit to south-east Asia last week, and he made particular reference to the pangolin, which at the moment is the world’s most trafficked animal. This Government are leading global efforts in combating this horrendous trade.

T6. [903919] Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Further to his earlier answer, does my right hon. Friend agree that the prospects for future trade with our close friend and economic partner India remain very bright?

The Minister for Trade Policy: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. I mentioned the India trade audit that has just been published. The Secretary of State met his Indian counterpart, Minister Prabhu, during our Joint Economic and Trade Committee meetings in January, and they agreed that bilateral work will now explore addressing barriers in four recommended sectors: food and drink, life sciences, information technology and services.

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T7. [903920] Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that free trade helps consumers by lowering prices and that free trade has been one of the biggest contributors to combating global poverty over the past 100 years? Will he embrace the opportunities created by Brexit to do free trade deals that will help consumers and British businesses?

Dr Fox: At the WTO this week, I again made the case for free trade, and the UK is a global champion of free trade. We tend to discuss our trade in terms of producers, but we must always remember that free trade is an enormous benefit to consumers in lowering prices, improving choice and increasing quality. Free trade has also been the route by which we have taken more than 1 billion people on this planet out of abject poverty in the past generation, which we should celebrate.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): With no prosecutions leading to convictions since 2011, with no register of arms brokers—as the USA, Canada, Germany and France have—and with the Government selling weapons and spy equipment to eight human rights abusers, how can the Government continue to claim that we have the strongest arms export regime in the world, or are they just not implementing the rules?

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether colleagues are aware of it, but they rather ruin their questions when they try to pack too much in. Topical questions are supposed to be brief. I understand the temptation—I used to feel it myself—but it ends up being a worse and a lesser question than something shorter and more pithy. It is such an obvious point that the hon. Gentleman must be extraordinarily clever not to be able to grasp it.

Graham Stuart: All export licence applications are considered on a case-by-case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria, based on the most up-to-date information and analysis available. I would be happy to meet the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) to discuss these issues further.

The Minister for Trade Policy: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. I mentioned the India trade audit that has just been published. The Secretary of State met his Indian counterpart, Minister Prabhu, during our Joint Economic and Trade Committee meetings in January, and they agreed that bilateral work will now explore addressing barriers in four recommended sectors: food and drink, life sciences, information technology and services.

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T8. [903921] Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): How can the many excellent manufacturing businesses in the Black country benefit when we leave the customs union?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is a fine and upstanding voice for the Black country. He will know that manufacturing experienced a 2.8% growth rate over the past year. Leaving the customs union provides an opportunity to enhance that growth, particularly as manufacturing exports outside the EU are growing so fast.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Women’s Vote Centenary Fund

1. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): How much of the centenary fund to celebrate women having the right to vote has been spent; and how much of that funding has been distributed to women’s organisations.

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Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will know that the Sheffield Female Political Association, founded in February 1851, was the first women’s suffrage organisation in the UK. Will she therefore join me in supporting the bid prepared by women across the voluntary, arts and education sectors to the fund? Will she wish them well in their ambition to use the centenary to encourage opportunities for civic engagement by women who feel disengaged and disempowered?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am delighted to congratulate him and to welcome the women of Sheffield in their bid to the centenary fund. I hope it will do exactly as he says: encourage more women to engage in political life in general.

Stephen Morgan: Will the Minister confirm what level of support the Government or their contracted company are providing to smaller women’s groups to encourage them to take up this funding?

Amber Rudd: Yes, I am happy to tell the hon. Gentleman that we have a website that will set all that out. If he wants to go on it himself, it is womenvotenectenaryfund.co.uk. The bidding process is set out there. Two types of grants are available. The larger one is up to £125,000 and the smaller one starts at £2,000. I hope that will give him and his constituents the information they need to apply for the grants.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Are we not in danger of rather missing the point that the best way to celebrate the centenary of women’s suffrage is to get 1,000 and, in our celebrations, make that point repeatedly so we can do both things: we can celebrate the centenary and, by voting and by participating in this place, I think we can all be proud.

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Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Are we not in danger of rather missing the point that the best way to celebrate the centenary of women’s suffrage is to get more women to register and actually to vote when elections turn up?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right, in that it is imperative that more women participate in political life, both by voting and by participating in this place. I think we can do both things: we can celebrate the centenary and, in our celebrations, make that point repeatedly so that we get more women involved.

Exitting the EU: Equalities Policy

3. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What assessment has she made of the effect on the Government’s policies on equality of the UK leaving the EU?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes): The UK Government’s record on equality is one of the best in the world, and leaving the EU will not change that. The equality Acts and equivalent legislation in Northern Ireland provide the cornerstone of equalities protections in the UK and in some places go much further than EU requirements, for example, in our world-leading approach to gender pay gap reporting. We do not need to be part of the EU to sustain our record in this area.

Chris Law: A recent study published in Social Policy and Society has found that the UK’s voting record in the EU has historically placed business interests over women’s rights. What steps are this Government taking to ensure that post-Brexit Britain will not place business interests above ensuring equality?

Suella Fernandes: This Government have a proud record of protecting and enhancing women’s rights, and that record of action predates our membership of the EU, as seen, for example, in the Equal Pay Act 1970. The EU’s own gender equality index places us sixth out of 28, and our gender pay gap reporting requirements and our public sector equality duty are world-leading initiatives that go beyond EU law in many ways.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): As on employment rights, the UK has a been right at the forefront of advancing equality across the world. Will the Minister confirm that that simply is not going to change?

Suella Fernandes: Yes, we have a proud record, history and tradition in the UK of supporting workers, protecting civil liberties and championing human rights. Leaving the EU will in no way affect that historical tradition, of which we can all be proud.

Workplace Sexual Harassment

4. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): If the Government will bring forward legislative proposals to amend section 40 of the Equality Act 2010 to protect employees from sexual harassment by third parties in the workplace.

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): The Equality Act 2010 provides protection from harassment for employees, whether committed by their employer, co-workers or a third party. The coalition Government repealed the third party harassment provisions in section 40 of the Equality Act because they were unnecessary and overcomplicated. Employers have a legal obligation to protect their workers, and may be liable if they fail to take reasonable steps to prevent harassment of workers by third parties.

Rachael Maskell: I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Unite’s campaign “Not on the menu” in the hospitality sector, and its research with cabin crew showing that the majority experience sexual harassment, demonstrate emphatically why section 40 of the Equality Act 2010 is vital. Will the Minister commit to implementing it, but with intervention after one episode not three, and focus on a zero-tolerance approach to any form of sexual harassment in the workplace?

Victoria Atkins: I am most concerned to hear about those incidents of harassment, and the hon. Lady should be reassured that they are covered already by the Equality Act. The reason those provisions in section 40 were repealed was that, as she has identified, they required not one but three occasions of harassment, and we know that, in the three years those provisions were in place, they were used only once. We have tried to improve the law, and I would encourage her to encourage people to use it.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is really encouraging to hear my hon. Friend’s response, but does she not agree that it is not just about getting the law right? We have to get the remedies within the law right. We have to encourage anonymised reporting in the workplace. We must also make sure that the unethical
use of non-disclosure agreements does not work to stop people bringing forward claims of sexual harassment in the first place.

**Victoria Atkins**: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. With her expertise on the Women and Equalities Committee, she knows only too well the challenge we have in advertising the rights that people have in the workplace. I am particularly concerned with non-disclosure agreements. We know that they can be used for lawful reasons—for example, to protect client confidentiality—but they cannot be used to shield employers from claims of harassment or discrimination, and any work that her Committee can do to help the Government in advertising that, I would very much welcome.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I know from my many battles in the coalition Government—some successful, some not—that the Conservatives’ obsession with deregulation often gets in the way of protecting vulnerable workers. It is that obsession. I say to the Minister, that is the real reason why the provisions in the Equality Act were repealed—I know because I was in the discussions at the time. Surely, in the light of the Presidents Club and all the other evidence that is now in the public domain, it is time to look again at the issue and, by all means, to improve on the original provisions, as suggested by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell).

**Victoria Atkins**: I very much pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work that she did as a Minister and that she continues to do now in the House. We of course keep this matter under review, but on the point I made about the section 40 amendments, general protection exists under the Act. However, we will continue to look at the evidence, and we are very, very clear: discrimination and harassment in the workplace is simply not on and is against the law.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): We have to be very clear about this. Because the Government repealed section 40 of the Equality Act 2010, there is now no statutory protection over third party harassment. If the Government are committed to protecting women and girls, will they show this by either reinstating section 40 or, at the very least, introducing stronger legislation to ensure protection against third party harassment?

**Victoria Atkins**: I hesitate to correct the hon. Lady, but that is simply not true: there is a general protection against harassment in the workplace; it is in the 2010 statute—it is a general protection against harassment. Of course, if there are any instances that Members on both sides of the House have of particular types of harassment or discrimination, I and the Home Secretary will always be willing to listen. However, the Equality Act protects workers; the general protection is there and, what is more, it is better than the section 40 protections, because it does not require three occasions of harassment; it requires just one.

**Period Poverty**

5. **Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to tackle period poverty.

**The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins)**: No girl or woman should be held back because of her gender or her background. This is why the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has identified period poverty as a priority for the tampon tax fund, which, in 2018 and 2019, totals £15 million. We have encouraged bids to address this issue.

**Dr Williams**: In Stockton South and across Teesside, residents led a “free period” campaign, which persuaded local authorities to provide free sanitary protection for women and girls living in poverty. Will the Minister meet me to work out how that might be replicated in other parts of the country?

**Victoria Atkins**: I am delighted to hear that Stockton-on-Tees Council has started that innovative project, and, in fairness to our Scottish colleagues, the same is happening in Aberdeen as well. I look forward very much to hearing the results of that pilot, and I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss them.

12. [903885] **Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): I was pleased to hear that the student union in Lincoln sells sanitary products at cost before VAT. Will the Minister acknowledge that sanitary products are not a luxury, but a necessity? My question is: will she accelerate the timetable for removing the tampon tax—yes, or no?

**Victoria Atkins**: I am also glad that our county university is leading the way on this, but the hon. Lady knows that we are constrained by our membership of the European Union.

**Karen Lee** indicated dissent.

**Victoria Atkins**: The hon. Lady shakes her head, but I am afraid that that is the law. We have lowered the rate to the lowest possible level—5%—and, what is more, we are using that money specifically for funds that help women and girls. We are waiting for the moment that we leave the European Union. I know that my Treasury colleagues are looking at exactly that issue.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is a stain on our society that there are young girls and women who are experiencing period poverty, and, frankly, it is tragic that our Government appear to have such ambivalence towards period poverty, although I welcome the latest announcement. Will the Minister agree to work with me on an innovative scheme, which is currently in its infancy, that I am running with a local supermarket to see how we can work towards the elimination of period poverty?

**Victoria Atkins**: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this issue, because it is important. We know that we do not have a substantial basis of evidence on period poverty, but we are trying to gather that evidence, particularly with schools. We do want to address the issue of the VAT charged on tampons and other sanitary products, and the moment that we leave the European Union we can do so. In the meantime, we are using the money raised by that low rate of VAT to help women and girls, particularly using those funds that deal with violence against women and girls. We
have a general programme with 12 sub-themes, including period poverty. I very much hope that that money will be of good use.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Last week, the Minister asked us to remember the suffragettes chained to the grilles. I ask the Minister today to remember those women chained to the house because of period poverty, those women chained to poor housing because of universal credit, and those women chained to an abusive partner because of the closure of refuges. Will the Minister work with me to develop and implement policies to help tackle those issues?

Victoria Atkins: The Government are led, if I may say, by a female Prime Minister—I just mention that as a small detail because Labour members have never managed to entrust the leadership of their party to a woman. We are proud of our record of helping women, which is precisely why we are bringing forward a ground-breaking piece of legislation this year to tackle domestic abuse, which will help both the victims of domestic abuse and their children. It is one measure in a long programme that we are carrying out to try to help women—not just women who are victims of crime, but women in the economy. We have more women in the workplace than ever before, and we all know that financial independence is a key indicator when it comes to ensuring that women are not stuck in those terrible relationships that the hon. Lady has described.

**Gender Pay Gap**

6. Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): How many and what proportion of employers within the scope of the gender pay gap regulations have published gender pay gap data.

7. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): How many and what proportion of employers within the scope of the gender pay gap regulations have published gender pay gap data.

8. Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): How many and what proportion of employers within the scope of the gender pay gap regulations have published gender pay gap data.

13. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): How many and what proportion of employers within the scope of the gender pay gap regulations have published gender pay gap data.

15. Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): How many and what proportion of employers within the scope of the gender pay gap regulations have published gender pay gap data.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): So far, more than 7,500 employers have registered their intention to report, and around 1,000 have published their data. The most recent data published by employers are publicly available via the Government viewing service on the gov.uk website. There is still more than a month until the public and private sector deadlines, and we expect reporting activity to increase significantly in the run-up to those dates.

Stella Creasy: One challenge that we face is that employers sometimes deliberately conflate fair pay with equal pay to avoid scrutiny of their conduct. A prime offender is the BBC. Seventy MPs wrote to the Secretary of State for Culture to ask him to use his power to ensure an equal opportunity for both men and women at the corporation to be heard on this subject. Given that he has refused to do so, will the right hon. Lady exercise her freedom of speech and have a word?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important matter. It has been instructive to see how the BBC has responded. I am happy to confirm that I will take forward her advice and indeed have a word.

Bambos Charalambous: What sanctions will be put in place for those companies that do not meet their obligations to publish their gender pay data by the deadline?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman asks an important question. We have put in place ground-breaking legislation to ensure that we close the gender pay gap. The Equality and Human Rights Commission will oversee any sorts of sanctions that are necessary. I hope that it will be its intention, as it is ours, to use persuasion and demonstration of the law to get participation, but of course it can use the full force of the law if it finds that the legislation is not being complied with.

Alex Sobel: What measures are the Government undertaking to work with private sector business, civil society and others to close the gender pay gap?

Amber Rudd: It is incredibly important that we do address closing the gender pay gap. Transparency is one of the key ways that we will achieve that. Having this compulsion of reporting on gender pay is an important first step, but we will take it further. We will engage with businesses to see what measures they will be putting in place to address the gender pay gap. My experience, when I talk to businesses about this, is that when they realise that they have such a gender pay gap—to some, it is a revelation—they are moving to put in training and other measures to address it.

Daniel Zeichner: Only three universities have so far reported on this. On a day when academics are bravely standing up to defend their pensions, will the Minister tell us when she expects that the gender pay gap will be eliminated in our universities?

Amber Rudd: I urge all universities to address reporting their gender pay gap. It is the law; they need to do so. I will say a word on the other matter, if I may. It is important that this dispute between students, effectively, the universities and their staff is resolved, because people need to get their degrees. I would urge the striking lecturers to get back to work.

Mr Sweeney: So far, only 1,000 out of 9,000 companies that are obliged to publish gender pay gap data have done so. What are the Government going to do to work that figure and ensure that companies are meeting their obligations to publish this vital data, so that we have the full picture?
Amber Rudd: It is vital data, and Conservative Members are proud of it because it has been introduced by a Conservative Government. We will be contacting private sector companies, and public sector organisations, to make sure that they do report. This is an important first step, with 1,000 so far and more to go until the deadline. I urge the hon. Gentleman not to make perfect the enemy of the good.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): When the Minister has a word with the BBC, will it be her contention that it is the men who are underpaid or the women who are underpaid?

Amber Rudd: That is almost a philosophical question from my hon. Friend. My priority is equality: that is the point I will be making.

Mr Speaker: Amongst other things, I have always thought of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) as a philosopher—[Interruption]—of some distinction.

Women Standing for Election

9. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage more women to stand for election to public office. [903882]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Amber Rudd): I am proud to be part of the most diverse Parliament in history. My hon. Friend is of course making his own contribution by being the first British-Chinese Member of Parliament, for which I welcome him. We are commissioning evidence to identify strategies to overcome barriers to participation. Through our centenary fund, we are supporting projects to get more women involved in all levels of governance and ultimately to stand for elected office.

Alan Mak: I thank the Minister for her answer and for her kind words. Twelve women Conservative councillors currently serve on Havant Borough Council, giving over 100 years of collective service. Will my right hon. Friend continue to support women into elected office at local government level and congratulate my friends locally on their service?

Amber Rudd: That is such a good question from my hon. Friend. It is so important that we also encourage women to participate more in local councils. Only 33% of local councillors are women, and I would like to see that number rise. I echo his thanks to his local councillors. I pay particular tribute to Councillor Gwen Blackett, who is soon to retire from Havant Borough Council following 45 years of service. I congratulate her on that, and congratulate the other women who have served as well.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The first woman to be elected to this Parliament was, of course, Countess Markievicz, an Irish nationalist. Is the Home Secretary, like me, looking forward to the presentation of a portrait of the countess next week by the Irish Speaker in the Irish Parliament to Mr Speaker in this Parliament?

Amber Rudd: Yes, I am looking forward to that, and I will make sure it is in my diary, so that I can join the hon. and learned Lady for the event.

Topical Questions

T1. [903922] Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Amber Rudd): I would like to update the House on the work we are doing to support people back into paid work after time spent caring for others, of whom 90% are women. We know that too often, people with skills and experience struggle to get back into jobs after taking time out of the labour market to care for children or other family members, and that is a huge loss for the economy, employers and those individuals. That is why we committed £5 million to support people back into work in last year’s spring Budget.

In the summer, we also announced new public sector programmes for returners, and I am pleased to inform the House that programmes for people wanting to return to jobs in social work and the health professions and a programme for people wanting to join the civil service after a break are all up and running. Next month, we will be launching practical guidance to help private sector employers get more returners back at the right skill level. I will continue to expand opportunities for people who want to return to employment, and I look forward to giving the House further updates.

Anna McMorrin: Tomorrow in my constituency of Cardiff North, I am hosting a pensions inequality meeting for women born in the 1950s. When will this Government be prepared to support these women all over the country who are being shamelessly exploited and robbed of their pensions?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): This legislation was passed in 1995 to create an equality between men and women. Those who seek to change the legislation would be effectively creating an inequality between men and women on an ongoing basis that has a dubious nature in law and an inequality between 1950s-born women and 1960s-born women.

T4. [903926] Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In this important centenary year, what steps are the Government taking to tackle the online abuse of women in public life?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. It is so important to protect women particularly, who get the largest share of abuse, from the type of attacks that can put them off participating in public life. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced a review that the Law Commission will do to ensure that what we say—what is illegal offline is illegal online—is
actually the case and that the law is following that guidance. We will come back to the House with further updates.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I welcome the draft Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill. As well as looking at new initiatives, I hope that it will consider the impact of Government policy on domestic violence. Will the Minister give a commitment that the child maintenance reform will include the abolition of the 4% tax on survivors of domestic violence? Will she ensure that that is included in the draft Bill?

Guy Opperman: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Lady for her question. I will refer to colleagues who are working on specific matters in relation to child maintenance, and we will make sure we write to her with a response on that important point within a week.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Some 89% of those who take time out of work to fulfil caring responsibilities are women, and employers, as my right hon. Friend has identified, have a huge role to play in helping women to return to work when they wish to. Can she set out more detail about the plans to publish guidance on best practice for private sector employers?

Amber Rudd: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that this is a priority. It is a priority for individuals, employers, families and the economy, which is why we allocated £5 million in the last spring Budget to make sure that we set up programmes for training, guidance and supporting businesses and employers in achieving exactly that. I will have further announcements on this and look forward to making them to the House.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The Department for Education is currently reviewing relationships and sex education. Has the Minister taken the opportunity to emphasise to her Education colleagues how important it is to identify female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage as a priority area in the curriculum?

Amber Rudd: I am incredibly proud that this Government have made that commitment, and we are going to consult on it to ensure that we get it right. It is important to distinguish between relationships education, which is going to be compulsory in primary schools, and sex and relationships education in secondary schools. The areas the hon. Lady highlights will of course be considered as part of that, but this Government have actually done a lot to address the scourge, unpleasantness and horror of forced marriage and FGM.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on what the Government are doing to improve female eligibility for auto-enrolled pension, including a very large proportion of women. I will update the House with the number of auto-enrolled employees in every constituency very shortly.

T2. [03923] Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What steps are the Government taking to ensure that women are not asked about their family plans or their childcare arrangements in job interviews?

Amber Rudd: I think I can honestly say to the hon. Lady that I was as shocked as she no doubt was to hear about that. I will be discussing it with the Equality and Human Rights Commission and finding out what further communication to employers is needed to ensure that that does not take place, because it is clearly not allowed.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Businesses have just two weeks to file their gender pay gap reports. It is clear from some excellent investigative journalism by the Financial Times that some businesses have filed incorrect data. If this is done deliberately, what will my right hon. Friend do?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that issue. This is incredibly important to get right. The reporting on the gender pay gap will be a vital tool in ensuring that we close it. I will be discussing it with the EHRC, which is the group that will follow up with enforcement. It is sufficiently funded to do exactly that, and I will be turning to it to ensure that this is handled properly.

T3. [03924] Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): With reference to the BBC and the gender pay gap, I have been looking at the diversity and background of the senior management at the corporation. Unfortunately, they will not play ball and give me the information I need to judge how they are doing in terms of diversity and social mobility, so will the Minister have a word with them about this as well?

Amber Rudd: It looks as though I will have a few things to take forward with the BBC, and I look forward to coming back to set out what those conversations have revealed.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Following the consultation that ended last September, when will my hon. Friend bring forward proposals to remove caste as a protected characteristic from the Equality Act 2010?

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): My hon. Friend has of course done so much work on this issue. It is clear from some excellent investigative journalism by the Financial Times that some businesses have filed incorrect data. If this is done deliberately, what will my right hon. Friend do?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that issue. This is incredibly important to get right. The reporting on the gender pay gap will be a vital tool in ensuring that we close it. I will be discussing it with the EHRC, which is the group that will follow up with enforcement. It is sufficiently funded to do exactly that, and I will be turning to it to ensure that this is handled properly.

T5. [03928] Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): What discussions have Ministers had with minority communities women’s groups, and how do the Government propose to address their specific concerns?

Amber Rudd: I have had a number of conversations with minority communities women’s groups. When I go out to discuss issues to do with integration, I always make a special point of engaging with women’s groups.
and finding out what else we can do to help them. Their concerns are often those that the hon. Gentleman and I might have about our own families—access to jobs, language courses and general public services—and my right hon. Friend the Housing, Communities and Local Government Secretary will shortly bring forward an integration strategy that will address some of those concerns.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): May I urge the Home Secretary, when she has her excellent ongoing conversations with social media companies on the west coast, to don her ministerial hat as the Minister for Women and Equalities and look at what those companies can do proactively to ensure that women in particular are not put off from going into public life?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the abuse of women online does put women off, and we need to make sure that less takes place in order to encourage them. The experience of my recent visit to the west coast to discuss high levels of crime online with the communications service providers—the internet companies—was productive. We have got them to agree to a number of additional measures that I think will persist.

T6. [903929] Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Will the Minister consider criminalising upskirting to end that degrading and humiliating practice?

Victoria Atkins: Upskirting is a modern phenomenon, and it is fair to say that the law has not quite kept up with modern habits. It is an issue of which I am aware, not least because my police and crime commissioner campaigns on it thoroughly. The Government are considering the issue, and perhaps in due course I could meet the hon. Lady to discuss it with her.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What ongoing work are the Government doing to tackle domestic violence?

Amber Rudd: I reassure my hon. Friend that we take domestic violence very seriously. We will shortly bring forward a consultation ahead of a new domestic violence Bill that will address that heinous crime and, I believe, start to reduce the amount of domestic abuse and violence that exists in this country.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): There is strong anecdotal evidence to suggest that girls are missing days of school due to period poverty. During my Westminster Hall debate, the then Minister for Women said that she wanted to commission research, and in her answer earlier today, the Minister for Women, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) suggested that that has happened. May I ask what has been commissioned; what research is being considered, and when it will be published before the House?

Victoria Atkins: We have sought to establish whether there has been any rigorous national assessment of the prevalence of period poverty and its impact on attendance, but none appears to be available. Last summer, we asked for help from the Association of School and College Leaders forum, and we received a limited response. We are trying to produce an analysis of our absence data to look for evidence of period poverty, and we will publish the findings of that in due course.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Further to the Minister’s earlier answer, if the state pension ages of men and women were to be different, would that infringe equality legislation?

Guy Opperman: Potentially yes.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Will the Minister explain what plans the Government will introduce to protect the 200 women and children who are turned away from refuges every single day?

Amber Rudd: I am proud that the Government have more beds available to victims of domestic violence than there were in 2010, and we take very seriously the issue of refuge for those victims. I am not entirely sure that the statistics used by the hon. Gentleman are correct, because sometimes when a woman is not accepted at one refuge and goes on to apply to a second or third, each application counts as one person being turned away. However, I share his view that we want to live in a country where women are not turned away and always have a place to go when they need it.
Air Quality

10.37 am

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con)/Urgent Question: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, what steps his Department will take to improve air quality after the High Court ruling on 21 February 2018.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Thérèse Coffey): In July last year, we published the UK plan for tackling nitrogen dioxide concentrations. Yesterday, the High Court handed down its judgment following a challenge to that plan, and the judge dismissed two of the three complaints that were considered in relation to England. Specifically, he found that there is no error in the Government’s approach to tackling NO₂ concentration exceedances in areas with some of the worst air quality problems, and that the national air quality modelling and monitoring that underpin the plan fulfill our legal requirements. On the five cities identified in 2015 as having particularly marked air quality challenges—Birmingham, Nottingham, Derby, Southampton and Leeds—the judge found that the Government’s approach to tackling their exceedances was “sensible, rational and lawful.”

The Court has asked us to go further in areas with less severe air quality problems. We previously considered that it was sufficient to take a pragmatic, less formal approach to such areas. I wrote to several councils in November, and that was followed up by officials who asked them to provide initial information on the action they were taking by 28 February. However, in view of the Court’s judgment, we are happy to take a more formal approach, and I have already written to the local authorities, asking them to attend a meeting on 28 February to discuss that information and their plans, and whether they can take any additional action to accelerate achieving compliance with legal limits of NO₂ concentrations. We will follow that up in March by issuing legally binding directions that require those councils to undertake studies to identify any such measures. As required by the Court order, we will publish a supplement to the 2017 plan by 5 October, drawing on the outcome of the authorities’ feasibility studies and plans.

As we set out in the 2017 plan, the Government are absolutely committed to improving air quality. We have pledged to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it. Later this year, we will be publishing a comprehensive clean air strategy, which will set out further steps to tackle air pollution more broadly.

Neil Parish: Minister, I believe that you are working very hard to improve air quality. This is not just about legislation; it is about practical actions to improve air quality. Are you, as Minister, getting enough co-operation from other Departments, including enough money from the Treasury, to address this serious issue? A Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs report found that particulate matter pollution costs some £16 billion a year and dramatically affects people’s lives. Does the Minister agree that preventive action would be far more cost-effective?

The High Court did find that the Secretary of State’s approach to the timetable is “sensible, lawful and rational” but not enough leadership is being provided in respect of all the local authorities’ pollution levels. Does the Minister agree that a new clean air Act will provide proper leadership, while allowing local authorities real autonomy to address the pollution levels they face at a targeted local level?

I welcome that the Government can be held to account through the courts and through Parliament, but does the Minister agree that the judgment is too focused on compliance when what we need is a much more detailed, wide-ranging and practical air quality plan? Clean air should be a right, not a privilege. I believe we need to hear much more from the Government now and we need to speed up the whole operation of cleaning our air.

Dr Coffey: I thank my hon. Friend for that. It is important, as he points out, to remember what we have already achieved on air quality, as well as what we are doing with local authorities. To remind the House, air pollution has improved significantly since 2010: nitrogen oxide emissions are down 27%, sulphur dioxide emissions are down 60%, particulate matter emissions are down by about 11%, and volatile organic compounds emissions are down by 9%. That is why we are investing £3.5 billion to improve air quality and reduce harmful emissions. Some of that is £1 billion to support the uptake of ultra low emission vehicles. Specifically with regard to the air quality plan, we set aside nearly half a billion pounds to help local authorities to develop and implement their local air quality plans. About £90 million has been given through the Green Bus fund and we continue to try to reduce emissions in other ways.

I remind my hon. Friend that we intend to end the sale of all new conventional petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2040. He talked about a wide-ranging plan. I have been working on that for a while. He knows that we will be bringing forward a comprehensive clean air strategy. In particular, I am absolutely focused on particulate matter. That is why we issued a call for evidence on domestic burning with regard to smoky coal and wet wood. We are looking forward to receiving more responses to that. On money from the Treasury, we have been given substantial funds to try to work this through. I agree with him about prevention in relation to issues such as particulate matter.

With regard to powers in a clean air Act, we need clean air action. Councils and the Government already have a lot of powers. It is about being prepared to make very difficult decisions at times. That is why I urge the leaders of councils, including those I wrote to yesterday, to really grip this issue on behalf of the people they represent and we represent. It really matters that we take direct, effective local action to ensure the future health of our citizens.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: This matter warrants the urgent attention of the House, which is, of course, why I granted the application for the urgent question. However, I am keen that we make timely progress, as the Back-Bench debates are heavily subscribed. There is, therefore, a premium on observation of time limits from the Front Bench and on very pithy inquiries from the back. I know that that will be reflected in succinct replies from the Minister.
Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I have heard the response from the Minister, but the reality is that yesterday the Government’s plan was ruled unlawful for the third time in three years. Here we find ourselves once again having to take the Government to court and having to summon them to the Dispatch Box for them to take any action on this serious issue of public health.

We know that air pollution is responsible for about 40,000 premature deaths each year, with cardiovascular disease accounting for an estimated 80% of all such premature deaths. Research by the British Heart Foundation found premature deaths and diseases attributable to air pollution in the UK result in over £20 billion in economic costs every year. The UK is currently routinely exceeding the legal pollution limits set out in the 2008 EU ambient air quality directive. That poses the serious question of whether this Conservative Government can be trusted with our environment and to deal with illegal air pollution after the UK leaves the EU, given the kind of ducking and diving we are witnessing now.

As the Select Committee on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has stated, this situation has escalated into a public health emergency, yet the Government’s attitude and actions do not appear in any way to reflect the severity and urgency of the situation. A press statement released by the Government yesterday appeared to spin the Court ruling—we have heard it again today—as some sort of win for the Government and played down responsibility for this incredibly serious failure. It is typical of a Government who provide high talk on the environment but are not capable of demonstrating the leadership and action necessary to make changes on the ground when it really counts.

Given that the matter has effectively been taken out of the Government’s hands, through what is an unprecedented step, does the Minister recognise her Department’s chronic failure to grasp the nettle on this issue? Will she confirm whether the Government plan to appeal the latest Court ruling? I understand that leaders of the affected local authorities have been invited to a workshop on 28 February. Will the Minister outline the purpose of the workshop and, crucially, what support will be made available to support those cash-strapped local authorities in delivering the action we now need?

Dr Coffey: As I have said before, I take this issue very seriously. I am not surprised that the hon. Lady failed to mention that the Welsh Labour Government were also a defendant in the judicial review. Welsh Ministers admitted that the Welsh element of the air quality plan last year did not satisfy the legal requirements, which is why they have undertaken to publish a supplemental plan. Frankly, therefore, the issue is not confined to the Minister at the Dispatch Box today.

Present problems with air quality in the UK are a direct result of the EU’s failed emissions testing regime, the actions of certain irresponsible car manufacturers and the rapid increase in the number of diesel cars on the roads since 2001. I should also point out that 21 other EU member states are also breaching legal air quality limits. I try not to take a partisan approach on this, but I am fed up with the Opposition simply not accepting their part of the responsibility. It was the last Labour Government who incentivised diesel cars. Between 2000 and 2010, the sale of diesel cars shot up from 15% to nearly half of all vehicles sold. I am not saying that previous Labour Ministers did not act in good faith, but as we have found out through a freedom of information request, Labour ignored advice that diesel fumes were toxic and pushed on, on the basis of lowering CO₂ emissions.

We do not intend to appeal the ruling because, in essence, the judgment turned on a narrow issue: that areas with shorter-term exceedances ought to be mandated to take action. We had already asked local authorities to do that and are more than happy to say that we will now issue legally binding directions stating that they need to take action. We will work with them. We had already asked them to provide initial information and plans, and we are now asking them to come to London next week so that we can go through those in detail and talk through the kinds of resources they need to ensure better air quality for the citizens we all represent.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend impress upon colleagues across the Government that this is not only an issue of fundamental social justice for many of our poorer citizens but about strengthening the UK economy, given that clean air is a business advantage? We do not want to fall behind Norway, the Netherlands and Scotland, which are looking to ban petrol and diesel cars by 2025, 2030 and 2032 respectively. Let us make sure that England is at the forefront, socially just and globally competitive on this issue.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government are working together to try to improve air quality. He will recognise that air pollution has already improved significantly since 2010. That is why we are working with local authorities to devise local solutions to make this happen. He mentions Scotland. Yes, the Scottish Government are also working on the introduction of a low emissions zone, but I can assure him that the situation in Glasgow is very serious, and I am sure that the Scottish Government, with the support of SNP MPs, will work to ensure they have effective solutions for their citizens, too.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): With three High Court cases lost, how critical does this situation need to get before the Government act? I appreciate the Minister’s words, and she mentioned Scotland, where all local authorities with air quality management areas now have action plans. We have set more stringent air quality targets than the rest of the UK and are the first country in Europe to legislate for particulate matter 2.5—a pollutant of special concern for human health. Perhaps I can help her out and meet her, because she will know the work that I have been doing on the aviation noise authority and making sure that it is independent. I wonder whether she would consider ensuring that pollution is taken into consideration and is part of its remit. In my Livingston constituency, I have set up a local noise authority, which ensures that the community can engage meaningfully with airports, airlines and government. Will she commit to ensuring that the aviation noise authority is truly independent and that the monitoring and management of pollution is also within its remit?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady now has the opportunity to breathe, and I am sure that she will find it a most welcome opportunity.
Dr Coffey: We all have the opportunity to breathe clean air in here, thanks to the excellent work of the House. The hon. Lady talked about the aviation noise authority. I am not a Transport Minister, so I am not aware of the issues that she raised, but there is no doubt that we want to continue to want to reduce emissions from aviation. That is why we are already working with other countries; I have instigated some elements on that. With regard to what is happening in Scotland, she will be aware that, in the Glasgow area, compliance with the legal limits is not predicted until 2026, so yet again, the money that we are investing in England has consequences for the Barnett formula. That will help the Scottish Government to achieve some of the outcomes that she wants. I will have to ask her to contact Transport Ministers to discuss the other matters that she deliberated on.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend’s proactive work on air quality, including in Dudley, and I urge her to work closely with local authorities to ensure that our air is clean and safe.

Dr Coffey: I thank my hon. Friend for that. Dudley is one of the areas that has been named. I have already been in conversation with Andy Street, the Mayor for the west midlands. He is very ambitious on the plans to make these improvements and I look forward to meeting the leader of Dudley Council next week to discuss further specific issues.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): If the UK leaves the EU, the Commission and the European Court of Justice lose their role in monitoring and enforcing air pollution standards. Back in November, the Environment Secretary told my Committee—the Environmental Audit Committee—that he would consult on a new body to fill that governance gap very early in the new year. When will we see that consultation? Will that body be in place before exit day? Will it have higher environmental standards, which is what the Environment Secretary says he wants, lower standards, which is what the Brexit brigade wants, or full regulatory alignment with the EU, which is what the Prime Minister has promised her EU colleagues?

Dr Coffey: The good news is that we had already invested £89 million in helping authorities to convert their buses, and another £40 million was added. When I visited the councillors involved in Manchester some time ago, they indicated that they are likely to use the powers under the Bus Services Act 2017 to ensure that they can do more on scheduling and requiring buses to be Euro 6 compliant in future. That is why we have been funding local councils right around the country to make that transition.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How much will air pollution be cut by the ban on the sale of petrol and diesel vehicles by 2040?

Dr Coffey: The expectation from the targets that we have legislated for is that the impacts of air pollution will be halved by 2030. One reason for saying that we will end the sale of conventional petrol and diesel cars by 2040 is to give a strong message to the manufacturers. We have seen a response already in that a number of manufacturers are saying that they will stop the production of such cars by the end of this decade. That is good news for people not only in the United Kingdom, but across Europe and the wider world.

Anna McMorran (Cardiff North) (Lab): For the last seven years, the UK has been in breach of EU limits on toxic pollutants linked to respiratory and cardiovascular conditions and stunted lung growth in young children. It is no use telling the parents of a seven-year-old that things will improve by 2030. Can we see greater urgency, more resources, more action now, and those responsible holding up their hands and admitting when they have got it wrong?

Dr Coffey: I am sure the hon. Lady will be talking to Lesley Griffiths and the Welsh Labour Government, because it is a devolved issue. They contributed a part of the 2017 air quality plan. Just a few months later, they recognised that it was not good enough and said they were going to do more. That is why we have been working with the Welsh Government to make improvements, and why at a national level we are taking measures regarding fleet turnover and incentives to move to the cleanest diesel possible for those people who still want to use diesel cars in the interim. That is also why we are taking measures such as increasing company car taxation on diesel cars. We are taking measures, but it is not usual practice for the UK
[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

Government to order the Welsh Government to do something that is devolved. I am sure that the hon. Lady will work with her colleagues in Cardiff to ensure that her citizens are better represented in making the case for air quality with the Welsh Government.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Older vehicles are the most polluting, and they tend to be owned by small and medium-sized enterprises or by people on low incomes. Will my hon. Friend look at the potential for a vehicle scrappage scheme for not only buses, but cars and lorries, so that we get the worst-polluting vehicles off the road more quickly?

Dr Coffey: On the air quality plan, we issued a consultation on mitigation measures and a potential scrappage scheme as part of that. We are still considering the responses, and will report back to the House shortly.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Yesterday I sat here listening to the Prime Minister’s response to my question, and I was very surprised at the gap between the briefing that she had been given by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—and, I accept, at short notice—and what I was reading through the news feeds. Will the Minister apologise to me and to the House for the briefing given to the Prime Minister that implied that the judgment was more a win than a loss, given that, as we now know very clearly, the Government have been found to be acting unlawfully, and so badly that the court is taking over DEFRA’s role in implementing the legislation?

Dr Coffey: I am afraid the hon. Lady is simply incorrect. The judge dismissed challenges about our approach to air quality. I wrote to councils last November asking them about how we can help to improve air quality in those 45 local authorities, and the judge said that urgent and encouraging was not sufficient, but that we should issue legally binding directions. That was reflected in what the Prime Minister said to the House yesterday, and that is what we will do. I encourage the hon. Lady to work with the Mayor of London, who has already had a substantial amount of funding, which he is using to start deploying cleaner buses and other aspects of modal shift in London. Frankly, he needs to accelerate his programme, and I encourage her to work with him in doing that and building on the plans of my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson).

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome the energy and resources that the Government are applying to this issue, particularly the clean bus funds, which will see a fleet of electric vehicles serving Harrogate and Knaresborough. Are all the local authorities that my hon. Friend is dealing with as committed and enthusiastic as she is about solving this issue? That has not been my experience so far.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend was a Treasury Minister when we were working on the air quality plan, and I know that he is as committed as I am to these improvements. I fully recognise that some of the issues involved are politically difficult, which is why I have been meeting councillors from those authorities to tell them that time cannot wait for effective local solutions. My hon. Friend ensured that we had Government finances with which to tackle the issue, and those finances will be deployed.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) rose—

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah! A Liberal Democrat competition. I call Layla Moran.

Layla Moran: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I am very grateful to the Minister for her letter and her offer to meet me to discuss the plan for Oxford, which I intend to take up. Will she confirm, however, that it is not just a meeting that she is having with the councils, and that there is also extra money? I know that they have already been trying.

Dr Coffey: I did not mention this earlier, but yesterday I wrote to all Members affected by the impact of yesterday’s legal ruling, which binds the councils legally to co-operate with what we were already doing. I have engaged in correspondence with the leader of Oxford City Council, and look forward to meeting her next week. The council is looking at certain proposals, which include widening the pedestrianised area in the city centre, to tackle the challenges. I want to know what resources or powers it may need, but I think that it has powers already, and it may just be a case of working through the details of the plan.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give us more details about what the Government are doing to support renewable technology to secure the future of clean energy in the United Kingdom?

Dr Coffey: In addition to the £3.5 billion that we are investing to tackle, in particular, air quality in the context of a modal shift, we are massively increasing the incentives for councils to help to deploy the infrastructure that is needed to support the growth in the use of electric vehicles. There is already a reasonably generous grant for people who wish to buy such vehicles—about £1 billion has been allocated—and, as my hon. Friend will know, legislation that is currently before Parliament will require fuel stations to provide the electric infrastructure that enables people to charge their cars, rather than just filling them with petrol and diesel.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As chair of my party’s Back-Bench environment, food and rural affairs committee, may I say to the Minister that this is not good enough? We are talking about a national health emergency: according to recent estimates, a million people could probably die by 2040. The Minister must act now, with the manufacturers, with local authorities, and with everyone else.

Dr Coffey: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s support for the effort to get local authorities working on this. He will, I hope, be aware from the letter that I sent him yesterday that we have been in correspondence. We recently
funded a significant number of buses—350, I think—in the West Yorkshire combined authority, and there is clearly an opportunity for those new buses to be deployed in the worst traffic hotspots, so that we can work on air pollution. I look forward to meeting the leader of Kirklees Council and other West Yorkshire authorities next week.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for meeting me a couple of weeks ago to discuss specific Bath issues. She was helpful and pragmatic. I agree that local leadership is needed.

The Minister mentioned the new legislation earlier. I do not think that it goes far enough. May I ask again whether she will consider introducing regulations requiring owners of public facilities such as supermarkets and public car parks to provide electric car charging points?

Dr Coffey: I did have a very constructive meeting with the hon. Lady recently. I also visited Bath last year to see at first hand the challenges that it is facing. The hon. Lady will know of the grants that have already been provided to increase electric vehicle take-up. However, I take her point, and I will discuss it with the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman).

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Oxford was excluded from the mandated list because only 3% of our monitoring sites were included. Do the Government now accept that that decision was wrong and that, as the first British city to commit itself to a zero-emission zone, we really need the powers and resources that she mentioned?

Dr Coffey: Oxford City Council already has those powers. It could have done this years ago. The powers were granted some time ago in the Transport Act 2000. The judge yesterday upheld the fact that our modelling had fulfilled our legal requirements, although I am conscious that the local air monitoring does not comply with the legislation by which we are bound. I am pleased that Oxford is considering wider pedestrianisation in its city centre, and I look forward to discussing that in detail next week. However, it has those powers already. It can get on with this, and I encourage it to do so as quickly as possible.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Although I am grateful to the Minister for the funding she has given to cash-strapped authorities such as Bristol for consultations on clean-air zones, I would like her to move a little further and think of the children who are at school in one of the worst-polluted areas in the centre of Bristol, St Michael on the Mount Without. Will she urgently consider a scrappage scheme for cars and other vehicles, such as taxis and buses?

Dr Coffey: I have discussed air quality with the hon. Lady before. She will be aware that I have had direct discussions with Bristol City Council. She will also be aware of the funding that has already gone in to help the uptake of electric vehicles and the buses that are being provided from transport funds. Bristol is making good progress. It is one of the councils that we mandated last year to come forward with action; I believe that it is on track, mainly, with its process and I look forward to receiving its final considerations later this year.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): After eight years of court cases, I find the Minister’s minimalistic approach quite staggering. Why are her Government investing in a new generation of dirty diesel trains, which are a major issue in my constituency, as they idle outside residential areas?

Dr Coffey: As my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), the Rail Minister, said, we are going to end the use of diesel-only trains by 2040. That has given a clear steer to the procurers and operators, on the basis that they tend to invest in 15-year cycles. Our rail electrification programme is considerably greater than that of the Labour Government, who, when in power for 13 years between 1997 and 2010, achieved 13 miles, so frankly, it is not for Labour Members to lecture us today about these issues. Since 2010, we have been investing to fix the problems that they left behind.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Three years after the Volkswagen story broke, how are the Government holding the company to account for its emissions scandal?

Dr Coffey: We have been holding Volkswagen to account. One of the challenges of how the EU operates in this regard is that it is for the German Government to be the regulator of Volkswagen, and we hold Volkswagen directly to account through the European Commission. I am pleased that Volkswagen has come forward with its wider group to do some of the retrofitting of vehicles in terms of software updates to correct what it did, and I am pleased that that is now being fixed, but frankly, the behaviour of Volkswagen and its chief executives was a disgrace. The way they used money to fund research into the effects of diesel fumes on primates and humans is frankly disgusting. They should hang their heads in shame, but we are now fixing the problems that they created.
Business of the House

11.7 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will include:

Monday 26 February—Estimates day (1st allotted day). Debate on Ministry of Defence estimates followed by a debate on the estimates of the Department for Exiting the European Union.

Tuesday 27 February—Estimates day (2nd allotted day). Debate on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government estimates so far as they relate to homelessness, followed by a debate on the estimates of the Department for Transport.

At 7 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

Wednesday 28 February—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill, followed by debate on a motion on the independent complaints and grievance policy. The Chairman of Ways and Means has named opposed private business for consideration.

Thursday 1 March—Debate on a Backbench Business Committee subject to be confirmed, followed by general debate on St David’s day. The subject of this debate was nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 2 March—The House will not be sitting.

The business for the week commencing 5 March will include:

Monday 5 March—Second Reading of the Data Protection Bill (Lords).

Mr Speaker, colleagues will also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the summer recess at the end of business on Tuesday 24 July and return on Tuesday 4 September. For the conference recess, the House will rise at the close of business on Thursday 13 September and return on Tuesday 9 October. The House will also rise on Tuesday 6 November and return on Monday 12 November and finally, for the Christmas recess, the House will rise at the conclusion of business on Thursday 20 December and return on Monday 7 January 2019.

This week, the very best of British has truly been on display. A number of Sunday’s British Academy of Film and Television Arts awards went to Brits, including the awards for best cinematographer and for rising star, and of course Gary Oldman won an award for playing none other than Winston Churchill in “Darkest Hour”. We have all been glued to our televisions watching our best-ever winter Olympics performance. We won three medals in one day, with Lizzy Yarnold successfully defending her gold in the skeleton. Sports and the arts are not just of huge value to British culture; they are also of huge value to our economy, and they have been showcased superbly this week.

This has also been a week of important firsts for women. Congratulations to the first Lady Usher of the Black Rod as she takes up her role, and to Minette Batters, who has been selected as the first female president of the National Farmers Union. Finally, Her Majesty was still achieving firsts as she appeared on the front row at London fashion week and presented an inaugural award in her name.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business for next week. However, I must echo what Marin Alsop said: it is the 21st century, yet we are still celebrating firsts for women. That must change.

It is helpful to have next week’s business, and I am sure that Members and staff of the House will be pleased to have the recess dates. I note that the business stops on 5 March. Can the right hon. Lady tell us what is going to happen after that, or will the Government continue to announce just one week plus a Monday in advance? If they are looking for something to fill the time, perhaps the Leader of the House could provide us with another Opposition day. I think the last one that was allocated was on 24 January.

Obviously, there is time available as the Government do not have any business, so could we consider two statutory instruments that have been prayed against by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner)? The first relates to early-day motion 936, on changing the eligibility of free school meals for those on universal credit.

[That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Free School Lunches and Milk, and School and Early Years Finance (Amendments Relating to Universal Credit) (England) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 148), dated 6 February 2018, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 February, be annulled.]

The second relates to early-day motion 937, which deals with regulations abolishing nursing bursaries for postgraduate nursing students.

[That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 136), dated 6 February 2018, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 February, be annulled.]

Could the Leader of the House honour the convention and allow time to debate those matters on the Floor of the House, so that we can have a vote on them before the 40-day period expires?

Will the Leader of the House tell us what news she has of the Trade Bill and the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill? I am sure that the Government will want to scotch rumours that they are being pushed away.

I thank the Leader of the House for her letter—which I received at eight minutes past 8 yesterday—responding to some of the queries that I had raised. It was a bit like the Morecambe and Wise joke in which Eric tells André Previn that he is playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order. In her letter, she answered questions, but they were not necessarily the ones that I asked. On the east coast railway line, for example, I did not ask her to tell me how wonderful Virgin was. I asked her a question about the Secretary of State taking back the contract. I asked her to write to me to tell me what costs were associated with the privatisation in the first place and with taking the contract back. I also asked whether the Secretary of State had made the decision to privatise a commercially viable service against the advice that had been given to him.
The Leader of the House also did not answer my question about the inspector looking into Northamptonshire County Council. I asked her let me know how long the inspection would take and what the terms of reference were. We also know that Buckinghamshire might be setting an illegal budget—this will be of interest to you, Mr Speaker—and I think that that might be happening today. Over the past five years, its Government support has been reduced from £61 million to £38 million. The Leader of the House needs to respond to that. I ask her this as a matter of courtesy: I know that she has a very able civil service staff, because I meet them on occasions, and I wonder whether she could sign her letters off slightly earlier—perhaps on a Tuesday?

We know from the book by Tim Shipman how the Government used to make their policy, with the two advisers walking in St James’s Park batting policy ideas back and forth. Now that they have lost their jobs, however, it seems that the Government are raiding the Labour manifesto. They are now having a review of tuition fees. It is irrelevant that more young people are going to university—they have been told that if they go to university and get a degree, they will get a better job, but students do not want to start off in life with a debt of £56,000. However, they receive invoices yearly telling them that they have to pay back that amount.

The matter of high pay rises for vice-chancellors was raised during the Education Committee hearing on value for money in higher education, and MPs told a panel of vice-chancellors that the high rate of pay enjoyed by some university leaders is immoral given the high rate of pay rises for vice-chancellors. However, they receive invoices yearly telling them that they have to pay back that amount.

It is almost a year since article 50 was triggered, and at the end of the weekend we may know exactly what the Government’s position will be. I do not know whether you received a copy of the letter to the Prime Minister. Mr Speaker, although it is marked private and confidential it seems that everyone has seen it. If you have not received it, I am quite happy to give it you. It reads like a ransom note. It might as well have had a bullet point at the end saying, “Don’t forget to do this,” or, “Do this, or else.” It was signed by 63 Members—well over that magic number of 40.

It is World Thinking Day, which is a day of international friendship. We want to stand by our international friends and with the young people in Florida who decided to remember the 17 people who were murdered last week by walking out of school and into their state capitol to demand change.

The Leader of the House and I could not be at the Brit awards yesterday—I was reading my letter from her at 8.30 pm—but I am sure that she will echo the Leader of the Opposition’s words about a young man who has changed the music industry. He encouraged everyone to vote, pray and speak out about mental health issues, and he won best album and best male artist. Stormzy, congratulations.

Andrea Leadsom: I start by sharing in the hon. Lady’s tribute to those who were tragically murdered before even reaching their prime in the appalling killings in Florida. We were all beyond shocked, and we are all slightly in despair that such things happen time and again. We desperately hope that action will now be taken to fulfil the wishes of those young people, who should be able to grow up in peace and security.

I am always happy to pay tribute to people who speak out about the importance of resolving the nation’s mental health issues. On Tuesday evening, I had the great pleasure of speaking at an event run by MQ, a charity that looks at research into mental health. I met some fantastic people who are doing everything they can to promote good mental health, and I am proud of the Government’s achievements in that area.

I am sorry that the hon. Lady is grumpy about my letter to her. I do my absolute best to be nothing but courteous to the hon. Lady, whom I respect enormously and for whom I have the greatest regard. I share her tribute to my civil service team, but she will recognise that there are only a handful of them, and the questions that she asks sometimes require answers from Departments. With specific regard to her detailed questions on Department for Transport matters, she will know that Transport Question Time happens often in this Chamber, and she is also at liberty to ask detailed questions of the Secretary of State for Transport, instead of being slightly churlish towards my team, who are doing their best on her behalf. I thank my tiny Department for its excellent turnaround rate on letters.

The hon. Lady talked about some things that I did not include in my response, such as the inspection at Northamptonshire County Council. The inspector’s report is due by 16 March, and I am sorry if that was omitted from my letter. The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who is sitting next to the shadow Leader of the House, has gone on Twitter criticising things that I failed to say in my very courteous and timely response to her. Mr Speaker, perhaps you might like to give your thoughts on how appropriate it is, when one tries to be courteous to colleagues, that they simply go on Twitter accusing me of not saying things that they would have liked me to have said. It is a little discourteous.

The shadow Leader of the House talks about tuition fees and says that the Government are taking a leaf out of Labour’s manifesto. I do not think we ever said that we would scrap tuition fees and deal with all the outstanding debt, which even the Opposition agree would have an appalling impact on our economy. We are seeking to look very seriously at what is the best combination for delivering excellence in post-18 education at an affordable price.

Finally, the shadow Leader of the House raises the issue of a letter from a number of Conservative MPs, and all I can say, as the Prime Minister’s spokesman
made very clear, is that all contributions from Members on both sides of the House to our position on Brexit are very welcome, and all are taken into account.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on support for women with endometriosis? An inspirational constituent, Ms Carla Cressy, suffers from this crippling condition, and she is leading a local and national campaign to raise awareness, which I hope the House will support.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a serious matter, and I certainly congratulate his constituent on her campaign. Statistics suggest that endometriosis is the second most common gynaecological condition in the United Kingdom, affecting one in 10 women. I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate to raise awareness of this condition further.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I am not sure whether she is going to the Brexit bonding/war session later this afternoon, but can we have a debate on what other dystopian nightmares Brexit will not be quite like? Maybe “Apocalypse Now”—apocalypse in a couple of years?—or “Children of Men”. My favourite would have to be “The Matrix”, as we have a bunch of clueless fantasists living in an alternative world and believing that they can impose their version of reality on everyone else—it could not be more apt than that.

On alternative realities, we had English votes for English laws in all its absurd glory yesterday. Bells go on, bells go off; Mace comes down, Mace goes up. Nothing ever happens. There is no debate and no consideration of all these weighty English-only issues; nothing goes on at all. It is now becoming profoundly embarrassing for this House. EVEL now seems to be designed only to get in the way of the workings and procedures of this House, and it is a psychological barrier to the unity of the membership of this House based on nationality and geography. For goodness’ sake, Leader of the House, get shot of this absurd system.

Lastly, I had the good fortune of being at the Brits last night to see the cream of British musical talent on show. Before you ask, Mr Speaker, MP4 were once again shamefully passed over for the parliamentary rock band of the year. It has taken our musicians to last night to see the cream of British talent on stage. The best of British, which is important for our young people and our musicians are reminding this Government to do the right thing.

Andrea Leadsom: On Grenfell, the hon. Gentleman was able to enjoy the Brits—the best of British, which is important for someone such as himself—and I am sure MP4 will have their day.

The hon. Gentleman talks about EVEL. He will appreciate that under the devolution settlement it is important that those directly affected should be able to hold the majority on votes affecting only English or English and Welsh situations. Finally, he talks about our life outside the EU, which in my opinion is much less “Mad Max” and far more “Love Actually”.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I am not even going to try to follow that one, Mr Speaker.

I have just received a report from Data Diligence, which my right hon. Friend will know about, because it pointed out the wrongdoings of Northamptonshire County Council. It has just sent me a report to prove that Taunton Deane Borough Council has been hiding money for years, in financial misprudence. May we please have a debate on this matter? It is important, as it shows that local government is sometimes not worthy of the trust we put in it.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has referred on this occasion to the council. May I just ask him whether he has notified the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) of his intention to raise this matter today?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I wrote to my hon. Friend. Friend, in line with your guidance in your letter. I thank you very much for your guidance, which I followed to the letter.

Mr Speaker: This is becoming rather tiresome. I did try gently to exhort the hon. Gentleman to pursue other lines of inquiry. I have permitted this today, but my patience is not unlimited.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that business questions are about business of this House, and he would be advised to speak to the Department for Communities and Local Government directly about his concerns.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Let me help the Leader of the House by saying that it has just been determined this morning that the other item of business on Thursday 1 March will be a debate on a motion on seasonal migrant workers. That has been settled this morning.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is backing the great exhibition of the north, which is being hosted in Gateshead and Newcastle from 22 June until 9 September. May we have a debate in Government time to promote the great exhibition of the north? I know that the Leader of the House would normally exhort a Member making such a request to go to the Backbench Business Committee, but that would hardly seem appropriate in my circumstances.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman could always go and chat to himself in the mirror, but that might appear a little odd to anyone watching. I pay tribute to
that great exhibition of the north, which I hope will be a huge success. I am sure he will find, as he just has, great ways to promote it.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I tell the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee that there is a famous scene in “Iolanthe” where the Lord Chancellor persuades himself of the merits of his own cause? May we have a debate on the working practices and procedures of the Education and Skills Funding Agency? There is a particular issue in my constituency with Bullers Wood School for Boys. The Secretary of State for Education is very much on the case, but there is an underlying picture of an organisation whose procurement processes are top-heavy, slow, hierarchical and very process-driven. This body is sometimes resistant to advice from external partners, who can often bring greater local knowledge to bear on its procurement processes.

**Mr Speaker**: Order. I must just say to the hon. Gentleman that I gather that he was spotted in a prominent place at the first night of the said performance. We hope he richly enjoyed himself.

**Andrea Leadsom**: My hon. Friend is a big champion for his constituency and for education, and I encourage him to take this up directly with Ministers or through an Adjournment debate.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): TransPennine Express has recently downgraded the vital rail link from Hull to Leeds and Manchester to a stopping service, which means that trains now stop at an additional six places along the way. Although it is important to have a stopping service to link together smaller towns, it is really important to have an express service, too. Please may we therefore have a debate in Government time on rail connectivity for northern cities?

**Andrea Leadsom**: The hon. Lady raises an important point. She will be aware that there will be Transport questions on Thursday 1 March, when she might well like to raise that issue directly with Ministers.

**Mr John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware of the retail giant Tesco hungrily taking over the wholesaler Booker. She will also be aware of the concerns about that on the part of farmers, growers and food producers: it would create an extraordinary distortion of the food chain at the expense of all those important people. Will she encourage those in the Government responsible for agriculture and business to let this House know what their feelings are about such market distortion?

**Andrea Leadsom**: My right hon. Friend will be aware that there are clear processes for looking at significant takeovers and at mergers and whether they are in the public interest, but he may well wish to raise that directly with Ministers or to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can talk about the particular interests of his constituency, which has a heavy reliance on the agricultural sector.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My constituents in Bridge of Weir have told me that universal credit claimants there are instructed to attend initial appointments in Greenock—nearly 12 miles away—despite the jobcentre in Johnstone being only 3 miles away. I have heard of claimants walking to and from Greenock, as the return bus fare of nearly £8 represents up to 14% of their benefit payment. Can we have a debate on how claimants from rural and semi-rural areas are affected by universal credit roll-out?

**Andrea Leadsom**: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. He will be aware that the Government are fully committed to the roll-out of universal credit as a good way to help more people back into work and have the security of a job and a pay packet. With regard to the specific points he raises about access to jobcentres to sign up for universal credit, if he wants to write to me, I can take them up directly with the Department on his behalf.

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Please may we have a debate on the communication strategy and responsibilities of Highways England? Two weeks ago, Highways England announced the total closure of a key part of the A1 through my constituency for three weeks in March, but it entirely failed to consult, or indeed communicate at all, with vital local businesses such as Purdy Lodge services and with local residents who will be heavily affected by this necessary work. The confusion and the lack of communication have been a real crisis for the area.

**Andrea Leadsom**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that. I think a number of hon. Members have had problems with lack of communication about significant road closures, so I am glad she has raised the issue in the Chamber. She may well want to take it up at Transport questions next Thursday, 1 March.

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): When can we have an urgent debate in Government time to discuss the state of our roads and particularly the number of potholes not just on our local roads but on motorways? Anyone who drives on the motorways will see many potholes, which are very dangerous.

**Andrea Leadsom**: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of potholes. It is a big frustration for all of us as individuals and in our constituency surgeries—there are lots of complaints about potholes. The Government have invested significant sums in dealing with potholes. There have been improvements in recent years, but the hon. Gentleman might like to talk to the Backbench Business Committee, so that Members can share their particular frustrations.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): My question follows that from my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) about the work of Highways England. The A180 into Grimsby and Cleethorpes is our major route, and it is vital to the local economy. It is undergoing unexpected roadworks at the moment, and there was very little consultation. I acknowledge that I could raise this at Transport questions,
[Martin Vickers]

but in view of the concern among other Members, perhaps we could find time for a Government debate on the issue.

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that my hon. Friend is speaking up for his constituency, as always. Again, at least in the first instance, he might want to raise the issue at Transport questions next week.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I mention the sad death yesterday of the great American evangelist Billy Graham? He was a great influence on many of us in this House. He was very saddened by the killing of children in schools in America, but he would also have been appalled by the daily death toll of children in Syria caused by this ghastly Syrian Government, backed by the Russians, day after day. Can we have an early statement to the House next week on any progress towards a halt in that awful, awful tragedy?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly share the hon. Gentleman’s tribute to Billy Graham who really was quite a life-changing character for many people during his long life. I also share the hon. Gentleman’s grave concern about what is happening in Syria. The Government have condemned the appalling loss of life, and we will do everything that we can to ensure that there is a ceasefire and that we make progress in finding a resolution in Syria.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Last week, in partnership with Disability Action Yorkshire, we brought together leaders from across my constituency—business leaders, service providers and transport providers—to discuss how to make Harrogate and Knaresborough even more friendly for disabled people. It was a very good session, with practical ideas put forward and helpful connections made. Can we have a debate, to build on the debate later today, to look at how we can make the UK more disability friendly?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his huge efforts in this area and commend him for the meeting that he called. He might be aware of the Backbench Business debate that takes place later today on the role of disabled people in economic growth. The Government spend more than £50 billion a year on benefits that support disabled people and people with health conditions. That is more than ever before—in fact, it is up £7 billion since 2010—with the result that there are now 3.5 million disabled people in work, which is an increase of nearly 600,000 in the past four years. He is right that there is still a lot more to do, and a lot more that can be done, but we are making some good progress.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Last year, a 13-year-old boy with a dairy allergy died after allegedly having cheese forced on him at school. Next month, children at the cinema will watch the much-loved character Peter Rabbit forcing a child to undergo an anaphylactic reaction, which can be fatal. Sony has apologised but has refused to cut the scene, and the film certificate classifies the film as having mild threat and comic violence. Food allergy is no laughing matter; it can be life or death. Can we have a debate on the bullying of children with allergies, which is clearly not taken seriously enough?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point, and she is absolutely right to highlight the seriousness of food allergies. We should do everything that we can to raise the importance and the awareness of the potential life-threatening impact of food allergies. She may well want to seek an Adjournment debate, so that she can talk to Ministers directly on that point.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): With the lambing season now upon us and domestic dog attacks on livestock at an all-time high, can we have a debate on what more the Government can do to limit the devastating effect that irresponsible dog owners have on both our rural communities and our rural economy?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that matter. We have all seen photographs of the appalling effect of a dog attack on a field of sheep. It is hugely distressing for the animals, obviously, as well as for the farmers who look after them, and it has serious financial implications. It is already a criminal offence for a dog to worry livestock; dog owners can be fined up to £1,000. Farmers are being encouraged to report any incidents, so that action can be taken. Furthermore, the dog welfare code highlights for owners the importance of keeping their dogs on leads when they are near livestock.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): University lecturers and staff are currently involved in a strike—the largest ever in higher education—owing to changes in their terms and conditions, particularly in their pensions. Can we have a statement, or an urgent debate, in this House about how we can resolve this impasse, so that the terms and conditions of our lecturers can be protected?

Andrea Leadsom: I must declare an interest, as my eldest son is about to study for his finals and now has no lecturers. At a very personal level, I cannot say that I support innocent students, who have paid their fees and worked very hard, being punished for the resolution of this challenge. Talks are ongoing, and the Universities Minister is engaging with Universities UK and the University and College Union to make it clear to all parties that there is a need to find a solution that avoids disruption to students.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Under this Government, the UK is leading international efforts to tackle tax avoidance. Can we have a debate on the impact that tax avoidance has on our vital public services and on what more can be done to make sure that everybody pays their fair share?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. He will be pleased, as I am, that the Government have a strong record on tackling tax avoidance, evasion and non-compliance. Since 2010, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has secured and protected over £175 billion in additional tax revenues through its compliance activities—more than the entire annual budget of the NHS. The UK’s tax gap is now down to 6%—its lowest level ever, and one of the lowest in the world.
Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): We still await the Government’s response to the independent review of S4C that was launched last year. In recent years, the channel’s budget has suffered successive real-terms cuts. What is more, the Wales-specific content broadcast in the English language on other channels has also decreased. May we have an urgent debate on the perilous position of broadcasting in Wales and the merits of devolving responsibility for it to the National Assembly for Wales?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly share the hon. Gentleman’s enthusiasm and support for the Welsh broadcasting service. He may well wish to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can take up his specific concerns directly with Ministers.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate on local news sites? Next Wednesday, Stuart Crowther, the editor of InsideMoray, will be publishing his final stories before taking a well-earned retirement. Since that site started in June 2013, it has been a valuable resource for local people and those further afield, and it complements our local print media. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Stuart on his efforts over the years and share my hope that someone will take over this successful site to ensure that it can continue in future?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a real champion for all things in Moray. I can assure him that the Government are committed to supporting an independent, vibrant and plural press industry. In particular, the local press is vital to this country’s democracy. I know that InsideMoray has published thousands of stories since 2013. I am happy to join him in congratulating Stuart on his amazing efforts and wishing him a very happy retirement.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Year 6 pupils Ella and George from Thornhill Junior and Infants School in my constituency wrote to me regarding their concerns about our dependence on fossil fuels and the harm caused by litter and plastics to our environment. Will the Leader of the House consider, further to today’s urgent question, giving more time for a debate about building a green economy based on clean, renewable energy?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Lady’s constituents on the really worthwhile campaign that they have started to run. I am sure that she will be delighted to hear of the number of MPs who have taken up the “give up plastic for Lent” challenge. I am not sure whether she has done so herself, but it is surprisingly difficult to stop using plastic. The Government are taking great steps forward through the 5p charge for plastic bags. We are reducing the number of plastic bags in circulation by about 9 billion, or some extraordinary number. There is a huge amount more to do to reduce our use of fossil fuels. We have announced the intention to get coal off the system by 2025. There is a lot more to be done, so the efforts of her constituents are greatly appreciated.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In the past two months alone, 25 civilians and at least seven service personnel have been murdered by terrorists in Jammu, Kashmir. In Kashmir, illegally occupied by Pakistan, 162 terrorist training bases have been identified. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what we can do in this country to help and support our great ally, India, in combating this terrorism?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly serious point. He will be aware that we work very closely with all our allies to try to stamp out terrorism and all terror attacks. He will, I am sure, want to raise this directly with Foreign Office Ministers, or perhaps through an Adjournment debate, so that he can get specific detail on what we are doing to address his point.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): One of my constituents, Ian Ackley, was the initial whistleblower on, and a victim of, the prolific serial child sex abuser and paedophile Barry Bennell. There has been no Government statement or debate about this historical child sexual abuse and what is being done to make sure that it never happens again. Will the Leader of the House make time available for this important issue to be debated?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very harrowing issue. I think that everyone in this House would want to send their deepest condolences and thoughts to the many victims of that paedophile. Some of the things that have happened to them are appalling. The hon. Gentleman may want to take it up, in the first instance, at Home Office questions next Monday.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): According to Persecution Relief, an ecumenical focus group, attacks on Christians in India have doubled in the past year to 736. Worryingly, it has also recorded a growing trend of attackers filing police complaints that accuse Christians of crimes such as sedition or even inviting attacks by offending local people and their religious sentiments. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on that matter?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises, as he often does, the issue of religious freedom. He will be pleased to know that there is a Backbench debate on 1 March on freedom of religion or belief, so he will have the opportunity—

Jim Shannon: It’s my debate!

Andrea Leadsom: Okay. I am delighted on the hon. Gentleman’s behalf, and I am sure it will be a great success.

Mr Speaker: It is very heartening to know that the hon. Gentleman is aware of the fact that the debate is taking place and that it is his. That is a good start.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I and a number of other Members have been raising with the Government the 1984 Cammell Laird strike. That campaign is currently undertaken by the GMB trade union. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, as a GMB member and sponsored MP. We have been raising that for a year,
including in the House at Justice questions last April and October. We have been waiting for meetings that have now been withdrawn. How on earth can we hold the Government to account when they refuse to answer questions in this place, offer meetings and then withdraw them and have us going round the houses for nearly a year?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry that I am unaware of the problem that the hon. Gentleman is raising with the Justice Department, but if he emails me, I can certainly look into that on his behalf.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Can we have an urgent debate on the future of the children’s centre network? That was one of the last Labour Government’s proudest achievements, but it has been cut back drastically on the basis that there would be streamlining of the service. In Gloucestershire, we are now facing the potential closure of the few remaining children’s centres. It is vital for the future of our children that we know what provision will be available.

Andrea Leadsom: I am an enormous fan of children’s centres. They were a fantastic initiative and have certainly provided a huge amount of support for children. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be aware that this Government have invested enormously in nurseries and childcare, enabling many more parents to benefit from up to £5,000 a year of tax-free childcare. More nursery care and qualified childcare is enabling more families to go back to work with the reassurance of knowing that their children are well cared for.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be well aware of legislation passed last year to prevent the mass farming of tickets by ticket touts, but when we read that tickets for “Hamilton”, for example, are now being retailed at £6,000, which is absolutely outrageous and ridiculous, is it not time that we had more comprehensive legislation dealing with ticket touting? Can we have an early statement from the relevant Department on that?

Andrea Leadsom: Having tried to get “Hamilton” tickets recently, I know that they are at a premium; I completely agree. The hon. Gentleman seems to offer me some tickets from his inside pocket. He is right that ticket touting is an enormous problem, and I certainly encourage him in the first instance to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can raise his concerns.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My constituent has faced 10 years of harassment and antisocial behaviour due to their neighbours using CCTV to track their movements in and out of their home. The constituent has raised with the police concerns about the surveillance camera code of practice. Will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary or a Home Office Minister to make a statement on the code and its success rate five years after it was published by the Government?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning issue. It must be horrible for his constituent to have to be harassed in that way. He will be aware that there are Home Office questions on Monday, and I encourage him to raise that directly with Ministers.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): NatWest bank is 73% publicly owned, and in my constituency, as in other communities across this country, it is closing many of its high street banking facilities. What responsibility do the Government accept for the damage caused to these local communities, and will they hold a debate on that issue and the justification for it?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady that access to banking is absolutely vital. She will be aware that banks’ decisions on whether to close are commercial decisions made by them. There is an agreement with the banking sector that they will consult widely and ensure that closures take place only where volumes and footfall justify such a closure. She will also be aware that the Government have invested heavily in the post office network, and that post offices now provide basic banking services for about 98% of all personal and business customers. Those customers can carry out basic banking transactions within the post office network.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Last year, the Supreme Court ruled that employment tribunal fees were unlawful and that all claimants should receive back their fees as a refund. The latest figures show that only about 6% of people have actually received such refunds, and I am at a loss to understand why that figure is so low, given that the tribunals service has the details of every single person who has made a claim. May we have a statement from the relevant Minister on what the Government will do to make sure that people get back the money to which they are legally entitled?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, which is clearly one for the Ministry of Justice. If he writes to me, I will take it up with the Department, but I encourage him to raise it directly with Ministers at the next Justice oral questions.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): May we have a statement on the role and responsibilities of the UK Government in supporting families of UK citizens missing abroad? Liam Colgan from Inverness went missing in Hamburg on 10 February. His family are worried that he is injured or suffering from memory loss, and they are very concerned about the level of help they are getting. They are desperate to find him, and they want to bring him home.

Andrea Leadsom: I am really sorry to hear about that. It must be an incredibly worrying time for Liam Colgan’s family, and I am quite sure that they are desperate to hear news of him. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to contact Ministers directly, so that he can seek their support.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Helen & Douglas House hospice in Oxford is having to close one of its two centres due to lack of funding, which means that it cannot now provide end-of-life care for 18 to 35-year-olds. Just under 47,000 people have signed a petition asking the Government to intervene on the closure. May we have a debate on hospice funding, so that colleagues can debate this and other hospices?

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady’s gratitude to Helen & Douglas House, which delivers amazing end-of-life care not just to her constituents, but to some of mine, and I am a huge enthusiast for the hospice movement.
The hon. Lady will be aware that local NHS commissioners determine the number of NHS funded hospices in their area, but I would like to reassure her that NHS England awarded £11 million for children’s hospices through the children’s hospice grant in 2017-18. She is right to raise this case, and she may well want to seek an Adjournment debate to discuss with a Minister what more can be done.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Why are the Government dodging the timetabling of Opposition day debates?

Andrea Leadsom: I just do not accept that the Government are dodging anything. Ever since I became Leader of the House of Commons following the general election, we have been absolutely clear that we are providing exactly the right and appropriate number of Opposition days, in accordance with the Standing Orders. We are continuing to do that, and we will continue to abide by the conventions and the Standing Orders of this House.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Many Members will have noted the recent case of Dr Hadiza Bawa-Garba, who was struck off after being convicted of gross negligence and manslaughter, despite its being an evident case of the institutional failure in the NHS that could have an impact on any junior doctor. This has led to an unprecedented loss of confidence in the General Medical Council among the medical profession. Will the Leader of the House call a debate on improving the governance of the GMC, so that we can restore confidence in it?

Andrea Leadsom: We were all very concerned to hear about that case. There is obviously a balance between transparency and enabling lessons to be learned from awful outcomes and situations. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the case, and I encourage him to take it up directly with Ministers at the next Health and Social Care questions.

Point of Order

11.54 am

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know this issue has been raised with you before, but I wish to raise it now while the Leader of the House is in her place. Many constituents come to Parliament to meet Ministers and raise significant issues. Many of my constituents have to travel from Edinburgh to London, but no facility is in place to assist them with travel expenses. Jennifer Stewart and Robert Ure came to see a Health Minister after my Adjournment debate about their son who is dying of a brain tumour, and they had to come to London at their own expense this week. Is there any mechanism to look at this issue again, so that those constituents who live furthest from London are not disenfranchised from meeting Ministers and participating in that process?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, but I am not aware of any current plan to make such provision. However, I have heard what he said, and I am conscious that in a different context the House does provide support—for example, for schoolchildren who visit this place from considerable distances away—and that a subsidy is in place to enable people who might not otherwise come to do so.

Off the top of my head, my sense is that a generalised provision might not find favour among my colleagues on the relevant Committees, and it is likely to be very expensive. However, where there are particular, pressing reasons for someone to come, and where it could be financially prohibitive or cause considerable disadvantage for them to come without assistance, perhaps my colleagues and I could look at that. If the hon. Gentleman is willing to write to me about the matter, I make a commitment that the relevant body in the House, whether that is the Administration Committee, the Finance Committee or, potentially, the House of Commons Commission, will consider the matter. I hope that is helpful and as much as the hon. Gentleman would reasonably expect me to say today. He has raised an important point, and I thank him for doing so.

If there are no further points of order, we come to the first Select Committee statement. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, who is poised and perched like a panther ready to pounce, will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, the Chair will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and the hon. Gentleman will respond to those in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Front-Bench Members may take part in questions. I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee.
Kurdish Aspirations and UK Interests

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee Statement

11.57 am

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): When you do those introductions, Mr Speaker, I keep waiting for you to say “No hesitation, repetition or deviation”, but I am afraid I cannot make that commitment today.

This is the third report by the Foreign Affairs Committee this Parliament, and I am proud to present it to the House. I think it addresses an important aspect of our foreign policy that, sadly, has often been overlooked by the United Kingdom for many years: the aspiration of the Kurdish people.

Britain has a long and historic connection to the Kurdish people that goes back well over a century. Our relationship with them during our period of governing Iraq, and later with the air policing role that we conducted over Iraq in the ‘90s, demonstrates that we have recognised and on many occasions had an appropriate commitment to the Kurdish people. That is made particularly relevant by Turkey’s recent attacks on Kurdish positions near Afrin, which in recent weeks have been deeply concerning. Those attacks are a continuation of a long struggle between Ankara and the various Kurdish groups, but they are also a new departure. On one side is NATO’s second largest army, and on the other, a militia that is backed by the alliance’s largest.

Those recent events have highlighted the relevance of the Committee’s work, and I thank all those who were key to this inquiry, especially all right hon. and hon. Members of the Committee. Those included—they deserve a mention—my hon. Friends the Members for Wealden (Ms Ghani) and for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). Their elevation to ministerial greatness has removed them from citation in the report, but they were very important to many elements of its production and it would be wrong to overlook their contributions.

Our inquiry considered the aftermath of the war against Daesh, during which those fighting the extremists shared an enemy but often held competing visions for what should follow its defeat. Kurdish groups were among those fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria. They played their part in the military victory and were supported by a global coalition, including us here in the United Kingdom. Their success led them to significantly expand their territory in both countries. That expansion has, in turn, raised tensions with regional Governments. They voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence. They did so in the face of opposition from Baghdad, regional states and the international community. They unilaterally included territories that the Kurds had taken from Daesh, but whose governance was disputed by Baghdad. That left them open to accusations of a land-grab.

We praised the work of the Foreign Office in trying to avert the referendum and in seeking to find an alternative way of fulfilling Kurdish aspirations. The FCO told us that, while it could potentially accept any outcome—including independence for the Kurds—that was negotiated consensually with the Government of Iraq, its preference would be for the Kurdistan region to remain in a united Iraq. But the overwhelming vote in favour of independence showed deep frustration and dissatisfaction with the region’s place in Iraq. Many Kurds feel imprisoned in a country that they see as not implementing its commitments of equality to them.

The deep differences between the sides have raised the risk of war. We recommended that the FCO should write to the Government of Iraq, formally offering itself in an enhanced role of facilitating dialogue. We asked that it be prepared to criticise both sides when criticism was due, because it had little to say to us about some of the issues underpinning the tensions. We said that the FCO should press the Government of Iraq to lift the restrictions placed on the Kurdistan region of Iraq after the referendum, most notably on air travel. It should also set out its assessment of the role of Shi’a militias in the reacquisition of the disputed territories and whether reports of crimes being committed by them are credible. It should explain whether it sees Iran as supporting or controlling the militias. For the Kurdistan region, the FCO should speak out against signs of corruption, the monopolisation of power or the curtailment of democracy. It should encourage political reform and economic diversification. These are issues that affect the whole of Iraq, undermining its reconstruction and threatening the viability of its future as a diverse but united country.

For Syria, our report focused on the People’s Protection Units—the so-called YPG—the armed group that is the target of Turkey’s current operation in Afrin. Its role as the armed wing of the Democratic Union party—the PYD—means that the two are often referred to as the PYD/YPG, a single, predominantly Kurdish entity. Since 2015, it has operated as part of a coalition called the Syrian Democratic Forces, or—ready for another one?—the SDF. The SDF includes non-Kurdish elements, but the PYD/YPG is the pre-eminent component.
Behind these TLAs—sorry, I mean three-letter acronyms—lie significant policy challenges with deep implications for the United Kingdom. The YPG, PYD and SDF are not just names—or letters—but an armed force and a political project that now encompasses more than a quarter of Syria. Their rise to that position was rapid, occurring in just over four years, as they led to the defeat of ISIS on the ground. That defeat was achieved with military support from the UK, the United States and others. The Americans provided weapons to the SDF and the YPG. The UK Government say they did not, but the RAF did carry out airstrikes to clear ISIS from its way. As such, we concluded that the expansion of the same group that Turkey is now attacking was likely assisted by the UK.

The PYD says that it does not seek independence from Syria, but it has helped to declare and administer a self-governing region in the areas of the country it now controls. The group described this region as being based on values of democracy and inclusivity that the UK should support, but Turkey’s account of the group and its self-declared region could not be more different. This leaves the UK caught between its two leading NATO allies. The US sees the SDF, of which the YPG is the main part, as its leading local ally against Daesh, but Turkey regards the YPG not only as an abuser of human rights but as an extension of the Kurdish Workers’ party, or PKK. It therefore sees the PYD and the YPG as a threat to its national security.

We asked the Foreign Office to explain its position and policy regarding the serious differences in approach between two of the UK’s leading allies. Like Turkey, the UK defines the PKK as a terrorist organisation; unlike Turkey, it does not apply that designation to the PYD or YPG. The evidence to our inquiry clearly argued that these organisations were linked, with the nature and extent of those links being debatable—some claimed they were remote, others that they were indeed the same organisation. The FCO’s view, however, was incoherent. Its statements referred to reported links between them, as though it had no clear view of its own, which is simply not credible. The UK is providing military might with no clear policy unless it has a clear view on this fundamental dispute. The extent to which the UK engages diplomatically with the PYD and supports the group’s inclusion in the Geneva peace talks will have deep implications for relations with the UK’s leading allies in the region. It will also have implications for whether a negotiated end can be brought to Syria’s conflict or whether the war will become yet more complicated and prolonged. Having supported the SDF, and therefore the YPG, militarily during the war against Daesh, the Foreign Office should now clarify whether it will continue to do so and whether it will engage diplomatically with the territory that the UK has helped the group to win.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. The events in Afrin kicked off only very late into our inquiry and so get only a fleeting mention in the report. Will he tell the House therefore, what he thinks the Foreign Office should be doing to try to resolve that dispute between Turkey and northern Syria, and how can it help to get the Geneva peace talks back on track?

Tom Tugendhat: I welcome the contribution of my hon. Friend, which he is, to the report—it was a full Committee effort to which everyone contributed enormously—and thank him for reminding me of an area I have not covered. The Foreign Office, of course, has an important role to play. We have supported one of the parties militarily and are an extremely close ally of the Turkish Republic. It is incumbent on us and our excellent Foreign Office staff in the region to seek to help that dialogue progress. Only through dialogue can this conflict be ended and a peace process begun, and Her Majesty’s Government are extremely well placed to make sure that happens.

The Minister for Africa (Harrriet Baldwin): I put on record our thanks to the Committee for its hard work in preparing the report. Thanks to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the team, the statement has come to the Floor of the House. I thank you for ensuring that that has happened—it is both timely, and extremely informative. I reassure the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee that I will pass on the comments made by him and others to the Foreign Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East, and that the Foreign Office commits to responding to the report in due course.

Tom Tugendhat: I welcome the Minister’s words. Very few of us here do not respect enormously the work of the Minister for the Middle East. His work, influence and knowledge of the region is second to none.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not about time that we made stronger representations through the NATO Parliamentary Assembly that one of our allies is spending huge resource in attacking potentially one of our other allies in the battle against Daesh?

Tom Tugendhat: I very much welcome the NATO Parliamentary Assembly’s work, and the hon. Gentleman is right that that is an excellent forum for discussion. However, I should say that the Turkish Government have not only the right, but the duty to protect their population against terrorist attacks and, if they feel threatened, it is incumbent on them to take action. I would much rather see both parties separating, so that we do not see conflict and the peace process can begin, with different groups not engaged in immediate battles.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I praise my hon. Friend for his statement and commend his Committee for its report. He is setting a very good example to other Chairs of Select Committees, who really ought to come to the House on Thursdays to present their reports. Is not the truth about the Kurds that British foreign policy towards them has been wrong for about 100 years? They were abandoned by us in 1918; we ignored them in the treaty of Versailles; and the problem has persisted ever since. Is it not true that, without the Kurds, ISIS would not have been defeated? We now face the extraordinary scenario where the Assad regime is backing the Kurds against the Turks in northern Syria. Given the fact that Turkey has an enormous border with Syria, will this not be an enormous problem for the international community to solve?

Tom Tugendhat: I am extremely grateful for my hon. Friend’s kind words. I have been clear since the time that I was elected to chair the Committee that I answer to the whole House, not just the Committee. I therefore
feel that it is my responsibility and not a choice—it is simply a duty—to respond to the House and to be available to respond on anything that we have covered.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right: Britain’s history has not been good. We must not forget the air policing, as it was then called. The then Colonial Secretary, one Winston Churchill, was the first person to use chemical weapons against the Kurds. Indeed, it was the RAF that dropped them. One reason that the RAF still exists is that it cut the cost of colonial policing by reducing the number of battalions required. I am afraid that that is true—we do not always have a glorious history.

The truth is that our role today is as a peacemaker and as an engaged friend of the whole region. In that, we should recognise that the Kurdish people have the right to self-determination, and we do recognise that, but we should encourage them to stay as part of the Republic of Iraq in the areas where they are within Iraq. Many witnesses we spoke to said that, although the referendum had called for independence, they were looking for greater autonomy within the Republic of Iraq, so there is more tension within the Kurdish position than appears immediately obvious. It is, of course, a tragedy that Syria remains governed by such a barbarous dictator and it is a great shame that he is being supported by so many around the world. The fact that he is now supporting Kurds to take on another NATO ally does not make us any happier.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the Chair of the Committee and its members for their comprehensive report. On page 5, paragraph 3, it states: “The evidence given to us was clear: future conflicts were probable, and Kurdish groups would likely be involved.”

Political events in Kurdistan-controlled areas and Turkey’s interactions have clearly cast a spell over the whole area. Did the Committee consider that Kurdish regional autonomy may be obstructed by Turkey, which is very obvious? However, is it possible that Iraq and Syria may consider it an option? Is it too late to give the Kurdish people the hope, vision and goal that they seek and deserve? Is it possible to move Kurdish regional autonomy from being aspirational to being practical?

Tom Tugendhat: Part of the evidence that we received was that Kurdish regional autonomy has been a matter of great debate even within the Kurdish region itself, and it is not absolutely clear that full independence is sought. There has been an enormous amount of debate about that and indeed some evidence pointed to the fact that greater autonomy in the Republic of Iraq was indeed what most were looking for. We did not look specifically into further details of that, so I will not go much further. I merely repeat that supporting the autonomy of the people of the Kurdish region is important, but so is supporting the Iraqi Government’s right to territorial integrity.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): We now come to the second Select Committee statement. Robert Neill will speak on this subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken, and I shall then call Members to ask him questions in the usual way. I call the Chair of the Justice Committee, Robert Neill.
that it can follow up on the implementation of its recommendations and hold the prisons to account. This is not a large sum in the overall scheme of things: perhaps one inspection team would be sufficient to do that task and probably the overall saving would mean that that would be offset. Secondly, Ministers should take personal responsibility for seeing that inspections reports are acted on and should account to the House for that, perhaps through a letter to the Justice Committee. That is the first of our practical recommendations, which we believe would offer a way forward.

There is also the whole question of the oversight itself. Given that there were these failings, we believe that greater work should be done to ensure the transparency and accountability of the above-establishment teams in the Department. There was also a clear problem with the facilities management contract. Not only had the backlog got worse, but it is pretty clear that basic issues that should have been picked up in the contract were not. The fact that there were rat and cockroach infestations shows the level of the problem. We are not satisfied with the explanations we were given for the failures in that contract and we therefore believe that there is a need for greater transparency, so we recommend that major contracts—this is a national contract with Amey—should be subject to a public framework outlining the expectations, performance and penalties levied against a provider for failure. If there are penalties, there should be a system of naming and shaming. Frankly, there should be a public notification of where failures occur and how much of a penalty is levied against the provider as a percentage of the contract. That is the whole point of outsourcing—to drive changes in behaviour—but we need transparency and openness to do that.

We also noted that part of the problem derives from persistent overcrowding. Liverpool prison was not understaffed—it was up to establishment—but it was nevertheless pressed for numbers. We therefore recommend that the Ministry and the Prison Service publish a plan to resolve the persistent overcrowding of the estate to take some of the pressure off governors. The new governor at Liverpool is clearly doing a very good job under difficult circumstances, but we need an overall plan to deal with overcrowding and that must aim to reduce the prison population and/or increase safe and decent capacity. We cannot have it both ways.

We were also concerned about the poor situation with healthcare that was discovered. We were glad to see commitments from the Prison Service and NHS England to publish a partnership agreement on how they are working together. However, the last partnership agreement expired in April 2017 and the new one will not be in place until 2018. The gap of a year is not satisfactory in that regard and we need steps to be taken to ensure that that does not happen again.

Finally, we need a commitment to ensuring that there is decent healthcare. It was explained to us that the overcrowding and a natural way of the regime meant frequently that prisoners could not be brought from their cells to healthcare appointments. We need a much more joined-up approach to that.

Those are the principal recommendations of our report, which I commend to the House. At the end of the day, the decency of a society is judged by how it treats those who offend against it as much as by how it treats those who do well by it. Liverpool failed in that regard.

We did not house prisoners in the decent conditions that common humanity and our international and domestic legal obligations order that we should. That failure cannot be allowed to happen again. Making greater use of the inspectorate and its tools and adopting our recommendations will, I hope, be a constructive way forward in assisting the Minister in what I entirely believe is his intention to get back to getting the basics right and improving the Prison Service. It is in that spirit that we put the report before the House and commend it to the Minister.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I welcome the Committee’s report and thank the Chair for his quick decision to hold an evidence session specifically on HMP Liverpool following the publication of the original inspectorate report. I further welcome his commitment, as stated here, to hold the Government to account when prisons fail. We have lost another life inside the prison this week. Anthony Paine, 35, who suffered with mental health problems, was found in his cell and died in hospital on Monday.

The report does not mention in detail the failure to invest in infrastructure and renovate wings or the loss and replacement of experienced prison officers and, critically, resources. Having seen the prison with my own eyes, I have no doubt that these are basic but expensive requirements, but in a written answer to me the Minister says that there is no plan to publish the costs or programme of urgent works at HMP Liverpool.

Does the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) agree that it is vital that we have transparency across our prison network and the improvements that are necessary if we are to see real change?

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I know that he knows Liverpool Walton jail, as it is often culled locally, very well. I entirely understand the point of his remarks and I hope that the Ministry will reflect on that. The whole thrust of our report is that we need to shine the light of transparency and publicity on these matters. We also, in a separate piece of work, have in hand an inquiry into the shape of the prison population by 2020. Part of that, again, is this need to deal with overcrowding. Our recommendation on persistent overcrowding is part of that. Getting the fabric right is necessary. Walton jail—Liverpool prison—is one of the old Victorian prisons and there is a real need for work to be done there. If we are publishing the public framework on facilities maintenance, I do not see why we should not be able to have similar publicity about the capital works that are required.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): This is an historic opportunity. I think that this is the first time in more than 200 years of our Prison Service that we have had an individual prison debated on the Floor of the House. I pay tribute to the Justice Committee for bringing the matter forward.

The situation in Liverpool prison was, as the Chairman of the Select Committee has pointed out, genuinely shocking. It is very disturbing and it is unbelievably important that Select Committees, inspectors and Members of Parliament hold us accountable for prisoners. These are closed communities. They are often hidden away from the public. In many areas, they can be forgotten, and without scrutiny standards can drop. They dropped very seriously in Liverpool prison.
[Rory Stewart]

The condition in the cells was unacceptable; how prisoners were treated was unacceptable, and the lack of purposeful activity was unacceptable. We are now addressing this hard and quickly, but there are still huge lessons to be learned through the system. I pay tribute to the new governor, Pia Sinha, who has come in, taken cells out of commission and made it clear that she has cleaned the prison and that her objective over the next six months is to get those cells into a smart, good condition. We now have the money in place to put in the new windows and she is focused on ensuring that the education and employment activity is good.

More generally, there are lessons right the way through the prison system. We need to get the basics right. There is no point talking about rehabilitation or dealing with reoffending unless we have clean, decent and safe spaces for all prisoners. We want our prisons to be smart and well-functioning. We are bringing in more than 2,000 more prison officers, and that will relieve some of the pressures on the prison estate, but these are new prison officers and they will need training and support until they have the prisoncraft to deliver what we require. We also need to invest a lot more in training. Because prisons are unbelievably complex environments, the governor needs the support and training—this could mean months of training—to ensure that they are in a position to turn around the prison. That training should also apply to the uniformed staff. Finally, the role of the inspector and the Select Committee will be vital in improving performance.

Robert Neill: I am particularly grateful to the Minister for that response. He is very much on the case in recognising that we must get basic things: cleanliness, decency, the maintenance of the establishment, and the ability to run a regime where people can get out to healthcare appointments and rehabilitative work. All that is critical. Unless we turn the existing problems around, we will face a real crisis in our prisons.

I look forward to working with the Minister on those matters. In particular, I hope that he will take up our recommendations on the inspectorate and the constructive role that it can play. I can honestly say that this is a case of a small investment being likely to pay off in the long term.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): As co-chair of the justice unions and family courts parliamentary group, I welcome the report, but it is amiss that the Justice Committee did not take evidence from unions representing frontline professionals. I understand from the Professional Trades Union for Prison, Correctional and Secure Psychiatric Workers that the maintenance contractor, Amey, refused to undertake pest control at HMP Liverpool, and the previous governor—who was also not called to give evidence—had to use his already hard-pressed budget. I wonder whether the Chair would agree that governors’ autonomy is convenient cover for the Government’s failure to be accountable for the dire condition of the prison estate.

Robert Neill: Let me say first that the Committee engaged with the POA on a number of occasions, and on an ongoing basis. Secondly, the issues relating to facilities maintenance were examined in some detail. We said in our report that we were not satisfied with the outcomes and intended to return to the issue. Thirdly, it was specifically not our role to examine the position of the previous governor in terms of the future. We heard evidence from the inspectorate about the position at that stage, and we heard evidence from the current governor about what is happening now, which is an improvement, but we did not think that going into further past history would be constructive. Our recommendations are for ways to try to ensure that this state of affairs does not occur again.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): One of the most distressing aspects of the report relates to healthcare. My hon. Friend has already spoken briefly about that. Does he feel, as I do, that we can have no confidence in the partnership agreement? One thing that it will not do is get prisoners out of their cells to attend appointments.

Robert Neill: I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend for his work in the Committee on this and many other reports. He is absolutely right. We are calling for the partnership agreement to be published, so that we can examine it, because we cannot be satisfied that it is yet fit for purpose. Previous partnership agreements have broken down, so we need to know how this will be different—in terms of both its structure and the way in which it will operate—to be reassured that there will be no repetition of what went wrong in the past.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and the Committee on an excellent, timely and important report. However, while it does move us forward, if we are to change our prisons from being simply places of detention in various outrageous conditions to being places where rehabilitation is central—which is what they ought to be—we still have an awfully long journey to travel. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons should be given the resources that it needs for re-inspection, but we also need to be able to establish whether we are delivering the quality of healthcare, education and all the other things that are necessary in prisons that will allow—mainly—our young men to come out and become acceptable citizens.

Robert Neill: I know how closely the hon. Gentleman followed this issue during his time as a police and crime commissioner and as the interim mayor in his part of the world. He is absolutely right. The report is a useful step forward, but I do not pretend it can be more than that. It has to be part of a systemic change, and I hope that it will help to drive that, but we must think about the systems and about a long-term strategy that relates to the real purpose of our prisons.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for his statement and his Committee for its report.

When the Care Quality Commission investigates local hospitals and makes recommendations, it returns to those hospitals at a later date to see whether they have been implemented. I do not understand why the same system cannot be introduced for Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons.

Is it not extremely alarming that the information given by Liverpool prison to the head of the Prison Service was so inaccurate? Given the speed with which the Committee’s report was produced, will my hon. Friend encourage the Minister to be equally quick in responding to its findings?
Robert Neill: The quick answers are yes, yes, yes and yes. My hon. Friend is right on those points, and I am sure that the Minister will respond quickly. It would be bizarre if recommendations from the Care Quality Commission or Ofsted were ignored in the wholesale way in which those of Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons have been ignored in the past, and that absolutely needs to change.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Chair of the Justice Committee, which I have recently rejoined. I also pay tribute to the Minister for the quick actions that he has reported. However, we must not forget why we find ourselves in this situation.

I am pleased about the announcement—made some time ago—of the recruitment of an extra 2,500 prison officers, but we must bear in mind that we lost 7,000, so there is still a gap of 4,500. The prison population figures are falling now, but they did go up. The nature of the inmates changed somewhat. The health needs of those imprisoned for historical sexual abuse, for instance, were obviously different from those of the other, existing prisoners, but the budget was not increased to deal with such differences. There has been a drain on resources. At the same time as the loss of the 7,000 prison officers, the drug Spice appeared, and became big business. There were fewer resources with which to manage the inmates, and morale went down with the loss of those prison officers. When recruitment did begin, a baggage handler could be paid more than one of the new recruits. It is important that when we do recruit—and we are recruiting now—those people are trained properly, not for a week but for months. Resources are what is needed. Of course money is important, but there is also the issue of how that money is used. As far as I can see, there has been absolutely no contract management. When I initiated a debate on mental health in prisons, I noted that there appeared to be no communication between the prisons and the health service. Contracts were awarded and money was given, but there was no monitoring of those contracts.

As the Justice Committee said, and as its Chair has said today, this is about systems and about getting them right. However, it is also about resources. It is about recruiting the right people, training and valuing them.

Robert Neill: I welcome the hon. Lady—in fact, I will call her my hon. Friend, because that is what she is—back to the Committee. I am very glad that she is with us once more.

It is true that we must look at all the issues. There is no single silver bullet. We need a comprehensive plan, and I urge the Government to work on that. I take the Minister’s assurances at face value, because I believe that he does have a desire to achieve what is needed. I look forward to working with him, on behalf of the Committee, to ensure that that happens. Staffing, resources, training, morale, the fabric of the establishment, facilities management and proper contract management are all part of the mix that we need to address.

ESTIMATES (LIAISON COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 145(3)),

That this House agrees with the Report of the Liaison Committee of 21 February:

(1) That a day not later than 18 March be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2017–18:
   Ministry of Defence, and Department for Exiting the European Union;
(2) That a further day not later than 18 March be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2017–18: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government so far as it relates to homelessness, and Department for Transport.—

(David Rutley:)

Question agreed to.
Backbench Business

Disabled People and Economic Growth

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Dr Lisa Cameron to speak for up to 15 minutes.

12.38 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the potential talent pool within the disabled community; notes that there will be an employment gap after the UK leaves the EU and that there is ample opportunity to include disabled workers in economic growth; calls on the Government to act immediately on its commitment to get one million more disabled people into employment by 2027; and further calls on the Government to increase awareness within the business community of the benefits of employing an inclusive workforce.

I pay tribute to the Backbench Business Committee for enabling the debate to take place. I also pay tribute to the many organisations that continuously champion the rights of people with disabilities throughout the United Kingdom. Without their enduring commitment, we would not be debating his important issue today. I pay special tribute to Leonard Cheshire Disability, to Disability Rights UK—which acts as secretariat to the all-party parliamentary group for disability, which I chair—and to the Disability@Work group. That group consists of dedicated academics from Cardiff University, Warwick business school and Cass business school, and it contributed to the APPG’s inquiry report “Ahead of the Arc”. Since commissioning the report, the all-party group for disability has been pressing the Government urgently to address the disability employment gap, and I know the Minister is open and willing to listen to the report’s suggestions.

This Backbench Business Committee debate is a significant step forward in the fight for equal rights for disabled people. To my knowledge, this is the first time that people with disabilities will be debated in the main Chamber with a focus on their abilities and as contributors to our economy, and not just as employees but as entrepreneurs and as business leaders.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that many employers need education, particularly about those who suffer from mental health difficulties, as many employers are scared or reluctant to take on somebody as they do not understand some of the issues such people face?

Dr Cameron: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and only yesterday I was contacted by a number of people and organisations reminding me to highlight that very point. People with mental health difficulties, and often people with hidden disabilities or disabilities that are not always apparent, can find it a struggle to explain and raise awareness about their difficulties and the adjustments they require. We need heightened awareness among employers—and in Parliament, too, I would suggest. We must continue along that path to raise awareness, to make sure we can harness the skills and potential of everyone for our economy.

All too often, people with disabilities are portrayed as passive and unwilling to work, but that could not be further from the truth. I want to use this debate to change the narrative. I want to see meaningful action, rather than research and rhetoric. I want to see a welfare system that treats people with disabilities as a willing and able workforce. I want to see improvements to current access routes and the development of new workplace cultures that reflect a genuine appreciation on the part of employers of the positive contributions that people with disabilities make, and I want to see accredited business schemes that go further than ticking boxes. While I might not be able to cover all these points in my speech, I know that colleagues across the parties will be passionately advocating similar policy and attitudinal change, which is much needed. I hope the Minister will take on board all Members’ suggestions here today and that we will make progress moving forward.

I want to start on a positive, uplifting note. I have been greatly heartened over the past few weeks by hearing accounts of disabled entrepreneurs, employees and businesses that are champions of their fields. I would like to share a few examples.

Hannah Chamberlain is a successful tech entrepreneur who recently won the £30,000 Stelios award for disabled entrepreneurs, which is run in conjunction with Leonard Cheshire Disability, after creating a video diary app that supports people to manage their mental health, called MentalSnapp. The app allows users to record short video diaries, rate their mood and name their feelings. It is an example of innovation at its finest, and I applaud Hannah for creating an app that will help so many.

John Cronin is an entrepreneur and now business leader who owns and runs his own sock company, which has made £1.4 million in its first year. John has Down’s syndrome. He runs the company in conjunction with his father and is the face of the brand. John is a business leader and manager, and nearly a third of his staff have a disability. John says his social and retail missions go hand in hand. He is a businessman and therefore is looking for good, reliable workers, and he believes the disabled community has a vast, untapped pool of great workers.

A number of larger corporations also understand the benefits of a diverse workforce. Corporations such as Channel 4 and Sainsbury’s are good examples of inclusive employers. Sainsbury’s and Channel 4’s workplace adjustment guides are second to none; both companies choose to focus on positive aspects of making adjustments, rather than their legal duty and minimal requirements to do so. Most importantly, these policies are distributed to all line managers, so everyone is aware of the adjustments they are entitled to, creating an open and inclusive environment and workforce in which both employees and company outputs can thrive. Channel 4 goes a step further by issuing “passports” for employees after receiving a workplace adjustment, so when the employee moves into a new role, or their line manager changes, the “passport” can be referred to and used in all future discussions with new line managers.

There are many other great examples of disabled business owners and entrepreneurs, and of inclusive employers, but I wanted to highlight those three, because each shows that in every corner of our economy, and in every type and size of business, inclusivity should be championed not just for ethical reasons, but because it makes good business and economic sense.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate and for the
examples she has given of good practices in certain organisations, but is she aware that only 16% of people with autism are in full-time employment and only 32% of autistic adults are in any kind of employment at all? Does she agree that much more needs to be done to close the autism employment gap?

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important intervention highlighting the autism employment gap, which is far too large—much larger even than the disability employment gap. We must take extra strides to support people with autism into work, because they have great skills and abilities and they will be fantastic contributors to our economy given the appropriate opportunities.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate and salute the work she does on the all-party group for disability. I serve on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions and we are currently looking at how employers, work coaches and people with disability can better understand the assistive technology that is emerging. Does the hon. Lady think we can do more to bring those three interested parties together to help people enter and stay in the workforce?

Dr Cameron: The hon. Gentleman makes an important intervention. I am fully a tech buff, but I am always heartened when we can see technology assisting people to achieve their potential and get into work. We need collaboration and to take those issues forward.

Examples of best practice are exactly that: they are examples to aspire to, and, as uplifting as they are, they are not a true reflection of the lived experiences of many disabled people. They do not reflect the systemic problems and barriers faced by many people with disabilities in looking for work or trying to retain it. It is time for Parliament to question why these practices, which move us forward and develop inclusivity, are not more commonplace.

In 2017, Scope published a report that found that one in two people with disabilities had experienced bullying and harassment at work and felt they could no longer take part in the workplace comfortably, and over half—58%—felt at risk of losing their job. This is not just about getting people into work; it is about ensuring there is an environment that maintains people in work and helps them to aspire to and achieve their potential. Disabled people also have to apply for more jobs than non-disabled people before finding one; research shows that almost 60% more jobs have to be applied for. Lauren Pitt reported to The Independent in 2017 that she had to apply for over 250 jobs before securing one, so something is clearly not working correctly. We must ensure that employers are open to employing people with disabilities and to seeing their skills, abilities and value to the workplace and the economy.

The disability employment gap is large and enduring. The most recent figures from 2017 show that the gap currently stands at 31.4%. About 80% of non-disabled people of working age are in work, but the figure for people with disabilities is just 49%. This has been routinely recognised by the Government, and in their 2015 manifesto the Conservatives committed to halving the gap. However, research from the all-party parliamentary group for disability shows that, on the basis of progress to September 2016, that would have taken 49 years to achieve. Their 2017 manifesto replaced that commitment with a new commitment to get 1 million more disabled people into work in the next 10 years. Analysis suggests that this new target is weaker and is likely to be met simply because the number of disabled people within the working-age population is increasing. Even though the Government might well meet their new target, the size of the disability employment gap might not actually shrink. We must take account of that.

Most of the Government’s proposals for reaching their more attainable commitment are published in the Command Paper “Improving Lives”. A brief look at the paper shows that almost all the policies are dependent on further research or pilot schemes and cost very little to run, so I would ask that we have adequate resourcing and prioritisation. We cannot afford to sit and wait. Unemployed people with disabilities are entitled to the same opportunities as everyone else—now. Our economy cannot afford to sit and wait either. Scope has estimated that reducing the disability employment gap by just 10% would generate a further £12 billion for the Exchequer by 2030, so it makes absolute economic sense.

Finding a solution to the problem will involve going significantly beyond the Government’s current focus on welfare and benefits. We will not see significant increases in the number of disabled people in employment unless employers can be encouraged to up their game, to acknowledge the positive contribution that people with disabilities make in the workplace and to develop new workplace cultures and practices that are more accommodating. Reasonable adjustments are key.

Alex Burghart: I support what the hon. Lady is saying about businesses. Does she think that there could be a case for having larger employers report on the proportion of their workforce who have a disability, so that we could see which large employers were not pulling their weight and not taking advantage of the high-quality disabled employees who are in the market?

Dr Cameron: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman on that point. It is particularly concerning that the Office for National Statistics has suspended publication of disability statistics from the labour force survey. We should ensure that that matter is addressed.

It is in employers’ self-interest to make a difference in this area, not least because it presents a solution to the labour market problems that this country is likely to face in the event of tighter controls on the free movement of people. The UK currently has a skills shortage, and it will become more profound once we leave the European Union. Indeed, KPMG recently published figures indicating that almost 1 million EU citizens, many of whom are highly qualified, are planning to leave following Brexit. We already have a willing workforce of people with disabilities whose skills are undervalued, and they should be trained in sectors that are developing and that will be much needed in the future. As has been mentioned, the health and tech sectors are extremely important.

This is fundamentally a labour supply issue. The Government will not be able to deliver on their industrial strategy if they do not have the capacity to do so, so we need to train our ready-and-waiting workforces across the UK. We need to see more investment in apprenticeships,
as well as the targeted, widespread advertisement of current Access to Work schemes, to encourage the business community to utilise our workforce. The new commitment in the industrial strategy to increase the proportion of apprenticeships started by people with disabilities by 20% is an excellent start, and I commend the Minister for that, but it is not enough. It will form only part of the solution.

The Government acknowledge this critical role for employers, but their main policy in this area is to encourage more employers to sign up to the Disability Confident scheme. As I have argued previously in Parliament, the evidence on Disability Confident is varied. It shows that the scheme does not go far enough, and that it does not result in enough people being employed. It is particularly worrying, therefore, that the “Improving Lives” Command Paper uses the scheme as one of its central policies for achieving the Government’s target.

The all-party parliamentary group’s “Ahead of the Arc” report sets out a number of bold new alternative policy initiatives that the Government should pursue. These include using public procurement contracts as leverage by stipulating that such contracts will only go to firms that monitor disabled people’s employment and commit to adopting an inclusive approach to their recruitment and retention policies. To that end, Government initiatives should think of people with disabilities not just as employees but as entrepreneurs and business leaders. The Government must ensure that disabled entrepreneurs receive the support they need from business advisory networks such as the Federation of Small Businesses and local chambers of commerce, as well as the financial support they need from bodies such as Innovate UK and the British Business Bank.

I referred earlier to two great examples of disabled entrepreneurs. The notion that disabled people can be business owners and entrepreneurs as well as employees was completely missed by the “Improving Lives” paper. We must ensure that disabled people are not pigeonholed into one sector and that they have the opportunity to choose their own future and be masters of their own lives. That is why the Access to Work scheme should also apply to start-ups, to accommodate the talent and innovation of people with disabilities. The Government must also go further and fund specialist advice services on taxation and benefits for people with disabilities who want to explore the opportunities of self-employment.

As I have laid out today, the solutions are there in every corner of the economy, and if action is taken, the benefits could be felt by all in society immediately. But for this to happen, we need to change the current narrative and put good policy into practice, so that my constituents and those of other hon. Members throughout the land recognise that we need to tap into the under-utilised constituents and those of other hon. Members throughout the Chamber today, and I look forward to hearing other colleagues’ experiences. I also look forward to working together as part of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, and across the House, to take this extremely important issue forward.

12.58 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. I shall try to be better behaved today. I am truly grateful to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for leading this afternoon’s debate, for the tone that she has struck and for her constructive ideas. This follows a valuable Westminster Hall debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) on the Government’s Disability Confident scheme, to which she also made a thoughtful contribution. During that debate, Members highlighted some of the economic opportunities that would result if we increased the participation of disabled people in the workplace. We also focused on barriers to employment, the disability employment gap and the Access to Work scheme. I shall therefore not go into those subjects again, beyond suggesting that the disability employment gap is an issue every bit as urgent as other workforce diversity challenges. In so far as it results from a lack of employer awareness of the support available, we as MPs ought to take the lead in publicising the Government assistance offered. In that vein, I have now signed up as a Disability Confident employer, and I have discussed with my local jobcentre the possibility of offering a work placement for local disabled jobseekers with an interest in politics.

This afternoon, however, I wish to focus on the economic cost that we will face if we fail to unlock the potential of disabled people of all ages, as well as on the economic power of disabled people both as an active consumer group and as a motivation to develop new assistive technologies with broader application to our growing elderly population. I have previously highlighted the cases of two autistic constituents who desperately want to work but who struggle with the initial stage of any new job. In the past few weeks, I have met the families of autistic children who believe that we must focus our attention on earlier support and intervention. I recently visited First Step, a local charity that provides intensive developmental support to pre-school children. It can be an enormous shock to parents to discover that their child has a disability, and First Step assists not only with the child’s development, but in supporting parents in a non-judgmental environment. Caring for a child with disabilities can place a huge financial strain on a family, particularly if parents need to take time off work or do not have the right support network in place. However, as one local parent said, “A failure to develop a child is not only a moral mistake, it is also a very expensive financial one. With proper, dedicated support these children could learn to talk and make a decent contribution to society. With no support, they will be left in adult day care centres or worse.”

Too often, local authority support is either entirely absent or limited and patchy. Early investment in the development and schooling of disabled children can lift the strain on parents, helping them return to the workplace, but it also increases the chances of economic participation when a child reaches adulthood and reduces the need for costly adult services later in life.
We also need to continue the steady improvements in accessibility to our transport system. The less daunting it is to leave the home, the more disabled people will be able to participate in the economy by working and spending. I commend the Government for their Access for All scheme. I support the Changing Places campaign, and I would be grateful if the Minister applied pressure on the Mayor of London to prioritise transport accessibility and facilities for disabled Londoners. Last week, Mr Khan found £6 million for new toilets for bus drivers. I wonder if he might make those facilities available to disabled transport users and also improve lift access to the District line, which runs through my constituency and is one of the most practical routes for disabled users to access.

With the advent of new assistive technologies, there is greater scope than ever for disabled people to contribute to growth, as well as colossal opportunities for UK tech and medical firms. As the Financial Times suggested in a recent article, 1 billion people across the world “have some form of disability. As people live longer, often with conditions that reduce their ability to use their hands or to co-ordinate, the market will grow sharply. Accessibility makes good business sense”.

British businesses are developing more sophisticated prosthetic limbs, accelerating stem cell technology, improving websites for disabled consumers and building the Canute, which is like a braille Kindle for blind readers. Such technologies will be vital not just to quality of life, but to making it easier for disabled people to participate fully in the workplace.

In recent years, disability sport has been critical in changing perceptions of those with disabilities, and I hope that technological developments will continue that positive trajectory. Our role as politicians must be to create an environment that not only facilitates technological development, but embeds it in everything we do—whether that is the setting of new buildings standards, the design of public buildings and information delivery, or the integration of public services with technology. I shall be most grateful to the Minister if she will update the House on how the Government are encouraging accessibility and nurturing firms and charities that are developing assistive technologies, and I would appreciate her views on the points raised about the importance of early investment and transport.

1.2 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow. However, when I read the Government’s “Improving Lives” report, I still feel a little downhearted, which is not my nature. Anyone who is a Liberal and downhearted is in the wrong party.

I want to offer a little story of when things work, which can be game-changing for both disabled people and businesses. About 10 years ago, I was working with one of the big utility companies, and it had a large call centre in north London. I am sure that Members of us worked for many years in this area with the Business Disability Forum to try to break through, and it was difficult.

After losing my seat at the 2015 election, I went away and have now come back, and the APPG is still going great guns under the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow. However, when I read the Government’s “Improving Lives” report, I still feel a little downhearted, which is not my nature. Anyone who is a Liberal and downhearted is in the wrong party.

I want to offer a little story of when things work, which can be game-changing for both disabled people and businesses. About 10 years ago, I was working with one of the big utility companies, and it had a large call centre in north London. I am sure that Members know that the turnover in call centres is always high, because it is a difficult job. The utility company had about 100 staff and, along with several others, I worked with the company to persuade it to take on 15 people with disabilities as call centre agents. It was hard work, but to give the company its due, it did agree.

As I said earlier, the difficulty is not about people being anti-disabled; it is about fear, anxiety and people not knowing how to deal with circumstances. They do not understand. People often just lift the carpet and sweep people with disabilities under it, which I have always found frustrating. It makes me angry, and I know that other Members share that view.

Going back to the call centre, the company did finally agree, we found the right number of disabled staff to be interviewed, and 15 or so were hired. A year later, 14 of them were still there. Two years later, there were still
Kilbride, Stratha ven and Lesmahagow mentioned, there recruit disabled people. As the hon. Member for East There need to be specific incentives for businesses to It is the same with disability. people had to wear seatbelts, and they got busted by the end of the world as we know it. What happened is that seatbelts became compulsory—people said it was the Another. I am old enough to remember the uproar when need to legislate. The DDA was one, and seatbelts was the Liberal, there are certain times when I believe that we they could be discriminating, which is why, even as a Government introduced the DDA—I do not often stand more than anyone in the House, and well-meaning is something focused. It is not enough just to say well-meaning reasons why I got involved in politics. It just takes a cycle of poverty, and that is certainly one of the main One of the reasons why many of us are MPs is that we know that helping people to get a job breaks the things I have been involved in this for years, probably more than anyone in the House, and well-meaning is not enough; regulation is needed. I am tremendously appreciative of the fact that the Conservative Prime Minister John Major and his Government introduced the DDA—I do not often stand up in the House and compliment Conservatives—because it forced people to change. People with emotional attitudes often do not realise that they could be wrong or that they could be discriminating, which is why, even as a Liberal, there are certain times when I believe that we need to legislate. The DDA was one, and seatbelts was another. I am old enough to remember the uproar when seatbelts became compulsory—people said it was the end of the world as we know it. What happened is that people had to wear seatbelts, and they got busted by the law if they did not. Since then, as we all know, the number of people dying in car accidents has plummeted. It is the same with disability. What needs to be done now, further to the DDA? All these years later, we still have not made enough progress. There need to be specific incentives for businesses to recruit disabled people. As the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow mentioned, there needs to be specific action on procurement. We need to be that prescriptive to break the logjam. The need is greater than ever because with Brexit, whatever side of the divide we sit on, we know that there will be substantial staff shortages over the coming years. In fact, a recent report identified that there will be 32 areas of staff shortages in tier 2 occupations. It has become ever more relevant to try to square this circle. I will not let the Government off the hook completely. It was not the decision of the current Disabilities Minister—this is not personal—but this Government’s decision to change the work-related activity group of ESA so that people receive a lot less money is foolish and short-sighted. There are three areas of ESA: the support group, which is for people with a disability such that they cannot work; basic ESA, at the front end; and, in the middle, for many years there has been WRAG. WRAG recognises that a claimant has a disability and pays them a bit of extra money, above and beyond the normal jobseeker’s allowance, because those claimants face extra costs due to their disability, but WRAG also recognises that those claimants are ready to work with support. That is really important, because it got people into the frame of mind of being ready to take a risk and leave the structure of the support group of ESA. After the coalition, after the Liberals were defenestrated, George Osborne quickly cut WRAG by 30%. I was really depressed about it when the change came into effect in April 2017, because I knew what would happen. It is human nature. We should never underestimate the strength of fear for a person in the support group who has been disabled for years and who has been outside work but who is ready, with a little encouragement, to step into WRAG and to try to go for a job. If I were that person, having been promptly told that my allowance is being cut by 30%, I would do whatever it takes to stay in the support group, because that is human nature. It is not rocket science. It is not bad. It is what people would do. It is what I would do. Even someone as intrepid as you, Mr Deputy Speaker, would do it because at least they would then be secure, with money for the roof over their head, for their children, for food and the rest. Reducing WRAG was such a foolish idea, and I am bitterly disappointed that the Government did it. It is a classic case of the Government cutting off their nose to spite their face. Since being re-elected, I have had shedloads of post from disabled people trying frantically to get back into the support group, and I am supporting them. I would like the Minister to address that, and perhaps to take back to the Chancellor the fact that reducing WRAG was a bad idea. Perhaps we can change it. Finally, where are we at? Again, I am grateful to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow for securing this important debate that affects hundreds of thousands of people across the country. There is not an MP in this House who does not have hundreds, if not thousands, of disabled constituents. This is so important, as we know from our casework and from how many people with disabilities come to see us for help and support. I would love to see this Government, or a Government, step up and do a DDA part 2 on employment that says businesses, the private and public sectors, organisations and charities across the piece have to do x to employ x number of disabled people, or at least to show that
they have systems and processes and that they have interviewed the requisite number of people with disabilities for every job. I do not want it to be tokenistic, as a lot of people with disabilities have tremendous skills—they just need the opportunity. If that happens, it will transform the employment opportunities for disabled people and it will transform many millions of families living in poverty in which one or both parents are disabled. It will be the game changer that this nation deserves, and it might just possibly be something positive to come out of Brexit.

1.18 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow for securing this Backbench Business debate. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), who is not just an hon. Friend but an actual friend.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): We are all friends.

Bim Afolami: We are all friends. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster made a powerful speech and stole at least half the things I was going to say.

People often ask, “Why did you go into politics?” I am sure we are all asked that, and we all have many reasons for going into politics, not just one. The most important reason I am in politics is to enable everybody to use their God-given talents, whatever they are, in the best way they can to contribute for themselves, for their family, for society and for the country. That is why I am in politics. People with disabilities are fully included in that, which is why this debate and this subject are of critical importance.

There will be those who say that many disability benefits should be more generous, and in some ways they probably should be. I know that the Minister, who truly and strongly believes in this brief, and Treasury Ministers will always do whatever they can to make sure appropriate resources are in place to help those who need them. But let us not kid ourselves. The subject of this debate is economic growth. What is important for people’s well-being and their lives is the opportunity to make the most of themselves in a professional, work, career capacity. That is crucial. Although benefits are important, we also need to do everything we can to get everybody who has a disability into appropriate work, where possible. That is what I regard as the heart of social mobility.

We often talk about social mobility in this House, in many different ways; we talk about it in debates about education, higher education, the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We talk about it all over the place. The way we usually talk about it is by discussing an individual who has come from a poor background but overcome the odds to achieve something fantastic and get to the top of a profession. We should celebrate that—it is what Britain is about—but social mobility is more fundamental: it is about ensuring that our society uses the skills and innate talents of those with and those without disabilities to their fullest. That is true social mobility. It allows everybody the ability to use their God-given talents and make the most of their lives.

Where are we now from a policy perspective—from a governmental perspective? The Conservative party manifesto in 2017, which I read carefully—that is a good thing for a new candidate to do—stated:

“We will get 1 million more people with disabilities into employment in the next ten years.”

By my calculations, we need to raise the number of people with disabilities in employment to about 4.5 million over the next 10 years to achieve that target. That would mean a growth of almost 30% on the current level. I think we would all agree in this House that that is a big task. The Government and my party are very focused on that—indeed, I suspect we will find that Members from across the House agree on it.

In November 2017, the Government set out a 10-year plan to improve the situation and to deliver on that manifesto pledge. I am sure the Minister will elucidate further on the plan and where the Government are with it. Its main thrust appeared to be linking up the welfare system, the workplace and healthcare. As has been alluded to in the debate, it was particularly about bringing in new technologies, especially assistive ones, to help to turbocharge the growth we have been gradually seeing, so that people with disabilities can enter the workplace.

A 5% rise in employment among people with disabilities would bring an increase in GDP of £23 billion, with tax revenues up by about £5 billion to £6 billion. That is a considerable amount. Research by Scope, the disabled charity, has found that 58% of disabled people have felt at risk of losing their job because of their impairment or condition. It is clear to me, and probably to most, if not all, Members of this House, that we need to work much more closely and intensively with employers to drive change.

Several decades ago, many employers did not like to employ women. What happened over time was that this House, working with employers and through legislation, helped to drive change. A few decades ago, we did not find people who looked like me or like the Opposition Front Benchers, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), in this place or in the other place, and several employers did not like to employ people of ethnic minorities. What happened was that this House, through legislation and by working closely with employers, helped to drive change. Now the time has come for those with disabilities to get much better access to employment opportunities. The Government need to work with employers, along with the legislation that is already in place, to help to drive change.

Disability Confident is a good scheme, which is welcomed generally across the business community, in government and in civil society, but we can go further. The Government should bear in mind the huge gains to be made—not only the economic ones, but the gains in terms of the life chances and economic potential of this huge group of people.

The Government need to work further on two main things to help to drive this change and this turbocharge. The first is to financially incentivise, perhaps through the tax system or in another way, employers to take on more people with disabilities, especially in industries where today they may not typically be found. For that to happen appropriately—businesses tell me this when I have the discussion with them—we need to be able to have a much better understanding of the different
capabilities of different people with disabilities, so that we can make sure that we match the right employment opportunities with the right people. That is critical. If we do that properly, in combination with proper incentives for business, we will be able to see a huge increase in this area.

Once more people with disabilities not only get into the workplace, but progress within it—through promotion and by getting to the top of their businesses—they will show what they can do. They will show what they can contribute. That will send a powerful message, not only to them, to society and to this House, but to the country as a whole.

1.26 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing this debate on an extraordinarily important subject. It is a shame more Members are not here today, but perhaps there are competing things to do. However, we have some of the best here in the Chamber; as Miss Jean Brodie would have said, we can consider ourselves the crème de la crème.

I have a personal interest in this matter, which I make known to the House: my wife has been disabled since 1999, and that has featured large in our lives. As some Members may be aware, once upon a time I was a Member of another place—I do not mean down the Corridor; I mean in Scotland. As my wife was disabled, I quickly realised that the temporary Scottish Parliament at the top of the royal mile was completely unsuitable for anyone who was disabled, which was why I volunteered to serve on the small committee that was given the responsibility of building the new building. We put in place complete disabled access, including in the Chamber of Holyrood itself. That job very nearly cost me my seat at my second election, such was the controversy attached to the Scottish Parliament at the time. But that was then and this is now, and for the record, I must say that I am proud to have been involved in building such a disabled-friendly place.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow talked about examples, which are ultra-important. I wish to make two points on that. First, this summer’s May games—one of the northernmost highland games, which the Prince of Wales likes to attend, as Duke of Rothesay, and he will do so again in the summer—will have disabled servicemen taking part in the events for the first time. That is an historic first for the highland games in Scotland and for my part of the world, the far north.

The other example that will stay with me to my dying day involved a former Member of this place, Dame Anne Begg, who graced the Labour Benches for a number of years. I knew Dame Anne because she was in a cross-party group dealing with oil and gas; I was in the Scottish Parliament and she was in Westminster. I will never forget going to visit an oil installation in a fjord in Norway. We were in a semi-open boat with a noisy engine, and Anne was there in her wheelchair. The weather can change very fast in the Atlantic, and in this particular Norwegian fjord, a storm came. The boat was going backwards and forwards, and lashing about. We had to lash Anne’s wheelchair to a thwart to prevent her from going overboard, but such was her courage and good humour that she never blinked once. That is an example of somebody who is disabled who faced adversity in life and yet got on with things. I will never forget that example of somebody who was very brave indeed. Based on those examples, the ambition is there, and I particularly pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for bringing that point out; it is hugely important.

Today, my wife volunteers for the local museum in my home town, and she is involved in raising money for Marie Curie. The point is that these unpaid involvements enrich her life; I can assure hon. Members that they make everything much more worth while. If we can broaden these things out into employment, we can see the great gift that can be given.

The points that have been made about taxation and benefits are absolutely right. I was intrigued yesterday. I have an Irish son-in-law, who, perhaps not surprisingly, has the name of Paddy. He came by Westminster yesterday evening in search, I think, of a small refreshment in the Strangers Bar. He asked me what I would be talking about today, and I said it would be this issue of disability and using resources. He said that he is mixed up in a textile business in the Republic of Ireland and that there is a Government incentive scheme to encourage businesses such as the one he works in to employ people in the situation we are talking about. That struck me. I did not get into more detail, but I will do in the future. I think we could learn something from the Republic on that. I sincerely hope we can.

The point has been made by the hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and for Hitchin and Harpenden and by others that we are mugs if we do not utilise the skills, ability, ambition and enthusiasm that is out there. Goodness knows, in the next few years, we are going to have to mobilise everything we have in the UK, because it will be an ever more difficult and competitive world. Be it Brexit or be it remain, that will be the reality, and we will have to use every single person we have to do the best we can. People will relish that opportunity—I have absolutely no doubt about that.

I look forward with great interest to hearing what the Minister has to say. I think we are as one in this Chamber. As a not so new Member now—I have been here seven and a bit months, not unlike the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden—I think that what Westminster does best is get on to issues such as this. I am astonished that this issue has not been debated in the Chamber before, but never mind—here we are today. As I said, to quote Jean Brodie again, we are the crème de la crème.

It is as simple as this: there is a bargain to be struck here. Disabled people are offering to keep their half of the bargain, and it is up to the Government—not just the Government, but all of us in society in the UK—to grasp their hand, honour our half of the bargain and make their lives better.

1.33 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing this important debate.
I am delighted to speak in today’s debate on the role of disabled people in economic growth. Economic growth is built on investment, development and progress but most of all on people. People are the essential building block—manual workers, service workers, foremen or managers, entrepreneurs and innovators, females and males, all ethnicities, and the able bodied and the disabled.

I would like to stress today not only that disabled people should and do play an essential role in economic growth but that the wording of this motion is a little too crude. This is not just about needing disabled people to be in jobs to boost economic growth; most importantly, they deserve the same career opportunities, so this is a question of not just economics but equality.

Only half of working-age people in the UK who are disabled or who have a health condition are in work, while the employment rate for people without disabilities is 80.6%. We must rectify this inequality and ensure that employers see the benefits of diverse workforces and of hiring those who have overcome obstacles. We must empower and assist the disabled, so that they have the confidence and the tools to work on an even playing field.

That is why I fully back the Government’s commitment and strategy to get 1 million more disabled people into employment by 2027. I am delighted that 100,000 more people with disabilities were in work last year than in 2016. Working with employers is key to reaching this target, which is why the Government’s pledge to work with work coaches, is so important.

Disabled people have overcome adversity and challenge and can offer workplaces essential skills, such as determination. They also generally stay in roles for longer and have lower rates of absenteeism. However, studies show that, still, only half of employers have reported that they recognise the benefits for their organisation of employing somebody with a disability or health condition.

This is therefore about changing attitudes and cultures, especially in certain sectors. For example, the rate of employment for disabled people in science, technology, engineering and maths-related roles is severely low. The problem is twofold. It is about encouraging disabled people to believe they can do these jobs, but, crucially, it is also about ensuring that the jobs exist, so working with employers is essential.

The Disability Confident scheme, which has been mentioned today in the House, has done great work in this area, helping organisations to improve how they attract, recruit and retain disabled workers. As of 16 November last year, there were 5,359 employers signed up to the scheme, so we need to do work to ensure that more follow. Like many MPs, I am proud to be a Disability Confident employer.

One of the biggest hurdles in encouraging businesses to hire disabled people is the adaptations needed to their offices. Those hurdles are perceived to be high, as a Mencap review recently highlighted. There is also a lack of awareness that the Equality Act 2010 means that employers are under a statutory duty to make reasonable adjustments. I am keen to hear from the Minister about how we plan to challenge these perceptions and this lack of awareness.

Adapting businesses is also important when a staff member has an accident or becomes ill. Creating a suitable and welcoming environment for them to return to is essential. In fact, the Centre for Social Justice “Rethinking Disability at Work” report found that the disability employment gap is partly driven by the large number of disabled people who fall out of employment, with one in 10 disabled people in work falling out each year, compared with only one in 20 in the non-disabled work population. Retention is therefore key. That is why I welcome the proposed sophistication of the fit note scheme, which will enable employers to better understand and support their employees’ needs.

It is important to note that there are Access to Work grants that can pay for special equipment, adaptations or support worker services, and I am delighted that these are now being rolled out to the self-employed. However, we need to raise awareness of them. Access to Work grants have been taken up by 25,000 people on average per year, but the figures have stagnated for the last three years, indicating that we really need to promote awareness. In addition, 65% of the grants given are to people aged over 40, implying that we really need to reach a younger age group.

I have spoken a lot about employers, but it is also crucial to give disabled individuals the confidence and support to apply for jobs. Mind stresses the point that physically disabled people also need emotional and mental health support when re-entering the workplace, and it is important not to forget that physical disabilities and mental health challenges are not mutually exclusive.

Jamie Stone: Does the hon. Lady agree that a disabled person in rewarding employment could be encouraged or paid to take time to act as a mentor to people who might follow in his or her footsteps, to show how it can be done?

Michelle Donelan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that excellent point, and I completely agree. Encouraging, inspiring and being role models for other people, and acting as mentors, is a wonderful idea, which we should pursue. It would encourage more people to have the self-belief and determination to progress their dreams and explore opportunities.

We should not treat physical disabilities and mental disabilities in silos; we need to treat them together to develop the best outcomes. I am delighted that the key focus of the White Paper, “The Future of work, health and disability”, includes that area and the roll-out of personal support packages with the recruitment of 200 community partners, 300 disability employment advisers, 100 small employers advisers and an extra 1,000 places in mental support services.

In conclusion, over the past two years, the disability employment gap has reduced by 1.9%, so we are on the right track. Finding work for an additional 1% of eligible employment and support allowance claimants in 2018-19 would save £240 million and provide a boost to the economy of £260 million. Therefore, getting more people with disabilities into jobs is essential. It would obviously be of great financial benefit to our country, but the main benefit would be to the disabled people themselves, and, in turn, it would make our society more equal. I shall end where I began and stress that it is an issue not just of economics, but of equality.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), and I thank her for her contribution. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—I hope that I pronounced her constituency correctly. [Interruption.] Ah, almost right. I will have to practise it. She is very clearly a champion for those with disabilities, and I am very pleased to be part of the all-party group for disability, which she chairs. Yesterday, I was able to participate in some of those things that she mentioned and give a Northern Ireland perspective on them. I will probably also give a Northern Ireland perspective today on where we are with this matter.

It is also nice to see the Minister in her place. We had an expression of her interest in this subject yesterday when we had the opportunity to take part in the disability confident campaign that the hon. Lady and the Minister organised. It was good to be able to support what the Minister was doing, but it also gave me the opportunity to increase my knowledge of the subject. The one thing about being an MP—in fact, the one thing about being any person—is that we can learn every day if we want to. Of course I want to extend my knowledge, and yesterday gave me a chance to do just that. I was also able to interact with those who were there and explain to them what we were doing. For example, we are doing a number of things in my constituency in relation to this matter—I mean that private business is doing a number of things. There are also policies and strategies in place. I wish the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), well and I look forward to her contribution.

It is a privilege to stand in this Chamber to represent and speak out for the many disabled people in our communities. We get our knowledge of this subject from our constituents, from our advice centres and from our everyday interaction in our communities. The briefing that the House of Commons Library so helpfully organised said:

“Over 7 million people of working age (16-64) in the UK are disabled or have a health condition, and 3.5 million of these are in work.”

That is good news. It also stated that

“350,000 are unemployed (meaning that they are not in work but are actively looking for work)”. I hope that this debate will provide us with the opportunity to see how we can achieve our goal. The briefing goes on to say that

“3.3 million are economically inactive (meaning they are not in work and are not looking for work).”

The fact is that some disabled people cannot work. That is a fact of life and must be accepted as such. However, for those who want to work, we should do our best to make that happen.

The employment rate of people who are disabled is 49.2%; the employment rate for people without disabilities is 80.6%. The employment rate for people with disabilities was 1.3 percentage points higher in April and June 2017 than in the same period of 2016. Over that same period, the number of people with disabilities in employment rose by 104,000. Clearly, a strategy is in place to try to address that issue, because more people with disabilities are in employment now than a year ago, so that must be good news.

Between July 2016 and June 2017, the employment rate—at 58.5%—was highest for people who were disabled in the south-west, and lowest in Northern Ireland at 36.7%. It is not often said, but the Library provides excellent information for us when we are preparing for these debates, which gives us a chance to do things well. I read the Disability Action report, “Hard at Work”, which was very interesting reading. As opposed to just citing the fact that there are only 33% of disabled people in work in Northern Ireland, it asks the question why, and I am going to ask that question in the Chamber today. I am very conscious that the Minister has no responsibility for Northern Ireland—I understand that—but to give some depth to this debate with facts and details, I want to add in the Northern Ireland perspective. Some things that have been done in Northern Ireland—or have not been done—can be put into practice on the mainland.

The overall employment rate in Northern Ireland is 5 percentage points lower than in Great Britain. For some groups, the gap is much wider—15 percentage points lower for disabled people in Northern Ireland compared with Great Britain. Thirty-three per cent of disabled people are in employment, which is less than half the rate of non-disabled people, and 50% of disabled applicants did not feel comfortable about disclosing their disability—I want to stress that point to the Minister because I am sure that it also applies to the UK mainland. This is something that we must address. I ask Members to forgive me for saying this, but we are all aware of the story that was in the press yesterday—I know that it is slightly different from what we are discussing today—about people having to disclose when they go for a job whether they are pregnant or intending to have a child. I think that it is wrong to ask that of anyone going for a job. The same thing applies to those with a disability. If a person does not say that they are disabled, they have a better chance of getting the job. If they say that they are disabled, will a wee box be ticked saying that they are not the right person for the job? Once in employment, disabled employees often do not feel confident about being open about their disability. Even when there is a problem in their job, they tend to keep it to themselves.

Research findings vary, estimating that between 20% and 50% of people with a disability feel that they face discrimination in employment, and less than half the respondents to one survey had asked for “reasonable adjustments”. Again, I say to the Minister that if people feel discriminated against, or if they are afraid to ask for reasonable adjustments, perhaps there is a big role for businesses to carry out. The reasons given for not asking for reasonable adjustments were

“not wanting to draw attention to their disability” or because “it would be embarrassing” to do so. Of those who did ask, nearly a third said that they received little or no help following their requests. Perhaps that underlines the other issue. When people ask for something, they are not even sure whether they will get it, or whether it will be done. Again, that is something that we need to look at. Perhaps sometimes we have to enforce such things through legislation and through Government intervention. It is small ways today to help people with so much to offer feel like they are a burden and unwanted in the workplace. Those concerns have been referred to by other Members today.
Concerns among employers in relation to employing disabled people included perceived risks to productivity, financial and other implications of making workplace adjustments, and confusion over negative perceptions around legislation. Perhaps people need to be more aware of what the legislation means and what it means for business as well. Despite employers’ concerns about perceived financial implications, a survey of more than 1,000 employers found that the majority provided adjustments. Let us be clear about this: the majority of businesses try to do the right thing. I am talking here about flexible working patterns and hours with no associated cost increase. I would like to ask the Minister a question and perhaps she can respond when she has the opportunity to do so. Can she tell me whether financial incentives are available for businesses to make those changes? I think that, sometimes, the cost factor does concern some businesses. If there is some help for them to make those adjustments, it would be helpful.

A recent survey highlighted the fact that 40% of respondents said that the option of modified hours—such as flexible or part-time working—would be an important factor in enabling them to enter and to stay in work. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to look at what happens with the disability living allowance, which has now moved to the personal independence payment. Even if people are on DLA, they need therapeutic work. We must understand that, sometimes, people are not fully able to carry out their duties because of their disablement, but, therapeutically, it is good for them to have some work for a certain period of time. Perhaps the Minister could give us her thoughts on that in her response this afternoon.

Perhaps most worrying for this place is that we must get our own house in order. Let me just illustrate the problem by way of an example from the civil service, but I will not name the person involved. Disabled people in the public sector still report being passed over for development and promotion opportunities, and that their performance is unfairly assessed. This suggests that talent is being wasted and a culture of discontent is being fostered. If we have not got our own house in order in government—at all levels, wherever it may be: at this level, at regional level, at council level, and so on—that is the first step that we must address in this place.

I always say, with regard to expecting people with illnesses to be in work, that it is up to the Government to set the example. I often use the example, as I do now, of a young constituent of mine who worked in the civil service. She had her DDA form filled in, so her employer—the civil service—was aware that she had ulcerative colitis. She applied for a transfer to a Department closer to home, to avoid the almost two-hour long rush-hour jaunt that she had to go through every day. She was not accommodated. She went to occupational health service meetings and was told numerous times that, yes, she should be off sick and should not return to work until the flare-up had settled down. She was then medically retired from work, as her employer felt she was unfit to work. She applied for benefits and was told that she was not entitled to ESA or DLA and that she should seek employment. This is the Catch-22: or chicken-and-egg situation—which comes first? The civil service expected someone to hire her, according to the ESA decision, just not itself.

Let us look at the process that she went through. At the age of 28, she was classified by the civil service as not fit to work but made to feel like a scrounger for feeling that if the civil service, with its hundreds of offices and roles and positions, could not facilitate her illness, then she would have no chance in the private sector. Thankfully, we were able to help with getting her ESA and DLA. Both claims went to appeals and reviews, but they were ultimately won. Every time she applied, we had to go through the same ritual because nobody believed that this girl could not work, despite the fact that she had been paid off because she was medically unfit. That makes absolutely no sense. We must lead by example. We must put into place initiatives that help disabled people to be confident in their abilities instead of feeling that only their disabilities are important. It is hard to expect small businesses to understand that a disability does not mean an inability to be a vital player in a team when we—I use the royal we, in terms of the civil service—are not able to do that, despite putting in place so-called protocols and schemes to prevent that from happening. This House is one place where I most certainly advocate that we get our house in order and do so quickly.

I look to my constituency and see the potential in our young people in Longstone School, which is one of the behavioural units where young people with disabilities as well as those with educational challenges are trained to work in what is sometimes, for them, a big, bad world. However, it is a world of opportunity, with so much more to offer, and we should be trying to move them towards it. Should we consider apprenticeships with financial support for those who have learning disabilities? I look to the Minister again. I have been looking to her for lots of answers; we are all doing so, because we respect her greatly. Would that help employers to think of employing disabled people as less of a gamble and to give them an opportunity? I am certain that many such apprenticeships would turn into employment.

What can we do to help those who want to work and have skills to offer, yet feel there is no place for them in the modern workplace? To me, that is what this debate is about. It is about giving them hope, vision and opportunity. If we can do that, we are moving in the right direction. I do not have the answers. My wife thinks that I have lots of answers, but I do not have answers to everything in the world. However, I try to seek out the answers, and that is the great advantage of this debate. I ask the Minister and her Department to consider this issue really seriously—I know that she will—and to come back to the House with more than a simple pledge to get disabled people into work. We need a plan to make this happen, starting with our own civil service.

I again commend the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Stratha ven and Lesmahagow for her compassion and for her interest in disability. I also commend all the other Members who have come along here on a Thursday afternoon—the graveyard shift—to participate in a really important debate.

1.53 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): As another Member with a four-barrelled constituency name, I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Stratha ven...
and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on bringing this debate to the Chamber. I commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for also attempting to promote her constituency; he did very well indeed. We heard from my hon. Friend a speech that was rich in detail, understanding and empathy. She really, truly understands the subject. I fully commend her for this very positively titled debate about the role of disabled people in economic growth. It is somewhat scandalous that we have not had the opportunity to debate this before, but that wrong has been righted today.

We in the SNP know that disabled people continue to make a fantastic contribution to our economy. All the words that we have heard here today show our empathy and the joint approach that we are taking to these issues, but comments that come from the Government themselves can do a lot of harm. Our approach to disabled people—the approach we have taken today—is in stark contrast to the UK Government’s Chancellor, who recently said that he thinks that disabled people are reducing productivity.

I would like to quote my hon. Friend, not from her speech today but from an excellent article she wrote recently:

“The answer is simple, invest in improving the pathways to work. Invest in disabled entrepreneurs, improve reasonable adjustment guidelines and encourage businesses to diversify their workforce. Create incentives rather than enforce sanctions. If the £108 million spent by the Government to deny disabled people the benefits they are entitled to was redirected to creating an apprenticeship schemes, entrepreneurship and training opportunities for example, then perhaps the narrative of people with disabilities could change.”

Those are very wise words.

I am most grateful to Scope for the briefing that it has sent along for this debate. Scope says of the Chancellor’s words:

“We found the Chancellor’s statements before the Treasury Select Committee...on the negative impact of disabled employees on UK productivity levels to be entirely untrue and unacceptable.”

It underlines a fact that was brought out by my hon. Friend, saying:

“In fact, a 10-percentage point rise in the employment rate amongst disabled people would increase GDP by £45 billion by 2030 and result in a £12 billion gain to the Exchequer.”

I hope that the Minister, who I know to be a thoughtful person, will reflect on the Chancellor’s remarks and take the opportunity today to distance herself from them.

There is a real opportunity to make a positive impact on tackling the disability employment gap in the economy, delivering the reforms needed to support more people to enter, remain and advance in work, but progress up until now has been slow. Government and employers need to do more if we are to harness the economic benefits that an increased disabled employment rate will bring. Tackling the disability employment gap would mean, as I have said, that economic growth and productivity would increase.

Employing disabled people is an opportunity for employers, delivering significant benefits to business and the economy. It is important to underline the calls from the all-party parliamentary group on disability. They are all relevant, but I mention especially tailored and targeted support for self-employed disabled people from such bodies as the Business Bank, funding for reasonable adjustments for disabled recipients of tech start-up support from Innovate UK, and bringing forward requirements for sectors to plan for recruitment.

It is also vital to recognise the additional challenges that are faced by disabled people. My hon. Friend talked about the high numbers of applications required simply to get a job interview, let alone a job. She said that we cannot afford to sit and wait. Throughout this debate, we have heard many people agreeing on the need for action, and that is what disabled people now want to see.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Gentleman rightly mentions the challenges and difficulties that disabled people face. One of those, depending on the form of disability, is that the fatigue element as the day progresses can be quite critical to the person. It would be best if employment opportunities could be tailored with specific reference to this fatigue, which can kick in after two or three hours of concentrated work.

Drew Hendry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is important to take into account the size and scale of the challenges people face, to make sure we are able to take full advantage.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow said, the UK already has a skills shortage, and the Brexit exodus of skilled labour means that the opportunity of training and apprenticeships must be embraced. As we have heard, the Government at the moment are not going far enough. Specialist advice services on self-employment are required, and we need to avoid stereotypes in these debates and the action that follows.

The additional challenges for disabled people also come down to hard cash and the extra costs that they have to cope with. New research from Scope shows that on average, disabled people have to find an additional £750 per month related to their condition, on top of any social security payments designed to meet those costs. The financial penalty locks disabled people out of being able to make a positive contribution to the economy. They need practical help, and the Government can help now. For example, the Government can help with motability, an issue that my hon. Friend is keen to bring up. Many people have seen their ability to move around or take part in employment and the economy hampered by motability issues.

It also comes down to the issue of PIP assessments. I was interested to hear from the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) and agree with him that more money should be spent on disability payments. There should be more social security to support disabled people, particularly given their disadvantage. The recent Work and Pensions Committee report on claimant experiences of PIP and ESA assessments presented clear evidence that the assessments are failing a substantial minority of claimants, with claimant stories highlighting clear errors made in assessments, crucial information being omitted and assessors lacking knowledge and expertise. It is not just about putting more money into the system; it is about making the system work for disabled people, which too often it does not at the moment.

Jim Shannon: Friday a week ago, I had the chance to meet Capita officials in Northern Ireland. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman and other Members that if it is...
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possible to have such a meeting, it might be helpful. We
were able to get a hotline to the people who can make
the changes and to ensure that the people doing the
assessments are up to speed, as he said. Capita needs to
change some of the things it is doing. We are going to
have a change in Northern Ireland, and Capita has
committed to that. I suggest that others do the same in
their own regions.

Drew Hendry: That is an important comment. I am
sure that the hon. Gentleman, having listened to me
speak on universal credit, PIP and ESA on many occasions,
can be reassured that I have indeed made that visit and
gone through that process, and I know what is involved.
I think his substantive point is that it is a good thing to
do. It does not iron out the difficulties that people have
had over years and continue to have, but it can help, and
wherever it can help, we must do that.

Between April 2016 and March 2017, the Scope
helpline saw a 542% rise in calls related to PIP payments,
and 65% of claimants who challenge a PIP decision at
tribunal are successful. There is much more that the
Government can do to help.

I want to finish with some criticisms, but given that I
know the Minister will be listening carefully and looking
for ways to take action, I will also talk about how we are
doing things back in our own constituencies, as the hon.
Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, and how
we are doing things differently in Scotland. I hope that
the Minister will listen carefully and take the opportunity
to learn or think about how things might be done
differently.

We have seen the impact that the UK Government’s
system has had on disabled people in Scotland. In
October this year, the Scottish Government found that
between 7,000 and 10,000 disabled people per year are
being affected by the removal of the work-related activity
component of employment and support allowance.
That is completely appalling and simply unacceptable.
They also found that 40,000 disabled people claiming ESA
have been affected by the bedroom tax. ESA is supposed
to support disabled people into employment. The
Government have said that the £30-a-week cut was to
remove incentives to be out of work. That is an outrageous
thing to do. It is pushing people into poverty and into
crisis.

The Government’s PIP assessment process is failing
disabled people. According to the DWP figures from
December 2017, one in five claimants who had gone
through mandatory reconsideration for PIP had their
reward changed, meaning that 20% of those initial
decisions were judged as wrong. I hope that the Minister
will consider some of the actions that have been taken
in Scotland, with the very limited powers that have been
transferred to Scotland.

Disabled people should have equal access to employment
opportunities in Scotland, and the Scottish National
party Government are committed to reducing the
employment gap by at least half. Disabled people’s
skills, hard work and commitment are valuable to any
employer, and practical and financial support must be
available to businesses. It makes sense to recruit from
the widest pool of talent possible.

Disabled people account for 20% of Scotland’s
population, and at the moment they make up just
11% of the private sector workforce and 11.7% of the
public sector workforce. The Scottish Government will
work with both sectors to look at target setting and how
to redress the imbalance. In April 2017, the Scottish
Government introduced employability programmes
delivered by a new service, Work First Scotland, including
employment support for up to 3,300 disabled people. In
July last year, a campaign was launched to boost awareness
among businesses of the benefits of employing people
with disabilities, specifically targeting small and medium-
sized enterprises.

From April 2018, a new devolved programme will
take a voluntary and person-led approach to ensure
that disabled people are offered support that is appropriate
and built on guaranteed service expectations from providers.
Disabled people engaging with the programme will
receive high-quality pre-employment support that identifies
and develops their strengths and assets, while focusing
on sustainable employment outcomes. Only today, the
Scottish Government announced that people will no
longer see a reduction in their benefit payments during
the appeal process. In the Minister’s response, she might
say whether the UK Government will consider taking
that action, too.

I think the message from both sides of the Chamber
today has been crystal clear: let us do all that can be
done to realise and release the potential of disabled
people for economic growth.

2.7 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Let me begin
by congratulating the hon. Member for East Killbride,
Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing
this important and timely debate. I commend her for
the work she has led on the all-party parliamentary
group for disability.

I would like to extend my thanks to a number of
disability organisations, including Disability Rights UK,
the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Scope,
Leonard Cheshire Disability and Action on Hearing
Loss, for all the work they have done on improving
employment opportunities for disabled people and for
the important briefings they have provided for today’s
very important debate.

There are currently around 11.6 million disabled
people in this country—people like me, who have factors
that could act as a barrier to engaging in a wide range of
valued activities, and not just economic activity, which
is the focus of our debate. Disabled people make up
around 16% of the working-age population, yet we face
barriers in all aspects of life, including in education,
transport, access to justice, access to voting, housing,
health and, most importantly, employment.

Almost eight years of Tory austerity have had a
disproportionate impact on disabled people. We know
that half of those who live in poverty are disabled or
live with someone who is disabled, in part because of
the additional cost of their disability, but also because
the labour market does not work well for disabled
people who are able to work.

The duty to make reasonable adjustments to support
disabled people in accessing education, employment,
housing, and goods and services is a key feature of the
Equality Act 2010. However, we know from the 2015-16
House of Lords report on the Equality Act and disabled
people that the legislation needs firm Government action.
to ensure that it is strongly upheld and to remove the barriers in society faced by disabled people who have a condition and/or an impairment.

It is a matter of serious concern that we have a Government who barely speak about removing barriers, while actually creating new ones through their austerity cuts and their punitive social security system. In their 2015 manifesto, the Tories pledged to halve the disability employment gap by 2020, but the TUC has found the Government to be years behind on that commitment. They have since dropped the pledge, and replaced it with a reduced commitment to getting 1 million more disabled people into work.

As we have heard, the rate of employment for disabled people stands at 49.2%, compared with 80.6% for the rest of the population in the most recent period for which figures are available, meaning that the disability employment gap lies at 31.3%. We know that the gap is even wider for specific disability groups. For registered blind and partially sighted individuals, only one in four people of working age is in work, and my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) mentioned the employment gap for those living with autism.

The Office for National Statistics recently announced that it was suspending publication of the disability employment rate indefinitely. The motion notes the fact that there will be a disability employment gap after Brexit, and the current gap in the UK is considerably above the European Union average of 21%. That illustrates the extent of the Government’s failure to take meaningful and serious action. In the light of this, why have the Government weakened their commitment to reducing the disability employment gap? It would be helpful if the Minister set out the measures she is taking to improve the ability of disabled people to enter work and—on retention—their ability to stay in work?

Many barriers faced by disabled people are shaped by false perceptions about the role they play in the workplace. Research by the Scope charity found that almost half of disabled people have worried about making employers aware of their impairment or their condition. We know that one of the key barriers that has been highlighted is how we shape employer attitudes to employing people with a disability. What are the Government going to do to support employers—especially small businesses, given that they make up nearly half the workforce—to employ disabled people? How can small businesses access affordable and timely occupational health support, and how can best practice be shared?

I must say I was surprised that disability and disabled people were not mentioned in the Budget, giving a very negative message to the population about the role of disabled people in the economy and giving the regrettable impression that their contribution to the economy is not being championed or prioritised by this Government. Will the Minister offer an explanation for this omission?

Opposition Members will build an economy that includes everybody, because that is how we can develop an economy that truly works for everybody, not just for a few.

I cannot stand at the Dispatch Box speaking on this subject without mentioning the comments made last December by the Chancellor of the Exchequer during Treasury Committee questioning, when he linked low productivity growth with the employment of disabled people. Unfortunately, there has been no apology for those comments, and his lack of remorse following the scapegoating of disabled people for a productivity crisis created by this Government’s failed economic policy speaks volumes. Does the Minister agree that there is a need for a clear and coherent message from the Government that employing disabled people can enhance productivity and make a real contribution to organisations and businesses across the UK?

Despite that, the Government finally managed to publish their long-awaited “Improving Lives” paper late last year. Some 90% of disability and long-term health conditions are acquired, so it is absolutely right to examine how employers can make reasonable adjustments to support an employee to stay in work if they become disabled. However, the paper did not set out how the Government intend to achieve or fund this aim.

To date, the Disability Confident campaign, launched in 2014, has been a dismal failure. It has made a negligible impact on the disability employment gap and has yet to produce any concrete evidence of results. Will the Minister confirm how many additional disabled people have found work as a direct result of the Disability Confident campaign?

The Access to Work programme, when it works well, provides invaluable support, but too often I hear about problems in relation to the administration and timeliness of payments, the cap on individual awards and the assessments. Ms French is a visually impaired person. Her experience of seeking employment is that when the subject of Access to Work came up, recruiters said that the employer was in too much of a hurry and would not be able to wait for an Access to Work assessment to be completed. As we all know, Access to Work is probably the best kept secret—it helps far too few people—and it will need significantly more resources if the Government are to get anywhere near the aim of getting 1 million more disabled people into work by 2027.

In the case of a deaf person, Mr Will, he was offered a job by a Disability Confident employer. However, once the employer realised that the Access to Work support would be capped and that they would have to meet the rest of the costs, the job offer was withdrawn. Will the Minister set out what substantive action the Government are taking to support people in work? What work have they done with disabled people to ensure that this support is flexible and responsive to need? More importantly, what additional funding will the Government make available, especially for Access to Work?

We have concerns about the language used in the Government’s “Improving Lives” paper, which centres on the idea that employment can “promote recovery”—the familiar sounding phrase, which says that disabled people and people with chronic conditions would recover if only they tried a bit harder, or were subject to an even tougher system. Will the Minister reassure people with disabilities limiting their ability to work and those actually unable to work that this is not the intended message her Government are trying to convey or that they believe in?

For nearly eight years, disabled people have borne the brunt of the cuts inflicted on them by this Government and the previous coalition Government. The cuts have had a detrimental impact on the lives of disabled people, cutting living standards and undermining their access
to education, social care and justice. In 2016, the United Nations convened a committee to investigate state violations of the UN convention of the rights of persons with disabilities. Its report concluded that the Government had committed “grave, systematic violations of the rights of persons with disabilities.”

That is a damning indictment of the treatment of disabled people by this Government—it shames us as a country—yet the Government have failed to act. We believe in a social model of disability and a society that removes the barriers restricting opportunities and choices for disabled people. We will incorporate the UN convention of the rights of persons with disabilities into law. I ask the Minister: why do the Government refuse to do the same?

Currently, 4.2 million disabled people live in poverty, and new evidence indicates that this number is increasing as a result of cuts in support. According to Scope, the Welfare Reform Act 2012 has cut nearly £28 billion in social security support from 3.7 million disabled people. Cuts contained in the Welfare Reform Act 2016 are adding to the suffering experienced by many disabled people, and that does not include cuts to social care, the NHS, education or transport—all of which have had a direct effect on disabled people.

Research by Scope that was published this week revealed that on average, disabled people face extra costs of £570 a month due to their impairment or condition, and that is on top of social security payments that are designed to help meet these costs. Extra costs mean that disabled people’s money simply does not go as far—£100 for a non-disabled person is equivalent to just £67 for a disabled person.

In addition to the four-year freeze in social security support, the 2016 Act cut financial support by £1,500 a year to half a million disabled people who had been found not fit for work, but who may in the future be in the ESA work-related activity group. Will the Minister provide the House with an assessment of the impact of social security cuts on disabled people and their ability to stay in work? The current social security system is to support its work.

It is important to hear voices from across the House, and we heard powerful, personal testimony from the hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), and for Battersea (Marsha de Cordova) about their lived experience of disability. They have all made significant contributions to improving opportunities for disabled people to play their full part in society. The hon. Member for Battersea raised some individual cases, and I would appreciate her providing me with the specific details so that I can resolve those matters.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) on becoming a Disability Confident employer. Yesterday she joined 78 Members of Parliament who have already done that, and there will be further such opportunities in the weeks and months ahead for those who have yet to take up the scheme. I praise her for and encourage her in the work that she will do in her constituency with Jobcentre Plus. Such work that we can do in our constituencies, such as helping local employers to take seriously our desire to see more disabled people in employment, is important and powerful. She raised an important point about the importance of working closely with employers on culture change, and I completely agree. We are considering the issues they raised about improving the Disability Confident scheme, although I refute what was said by the hon. Member for Battersea—this is not a failing scheme; it is a growing scheme. We are looking at what more we can do to incentivise businesses, and at publishing levels of disability employment, especially for large employers. We are also considering what more we can do to communicate the wide range of help that is available to support businesses and public sector organisations to employ disabled people.
I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on becoming a Disability Confident employer yesterday. He said how important it is that people feel confident enough to disclose their disability and for employers to feel confident in hearing that news, and he asked how we can work together to ensure that happens. Financial support is available to a disabled person through the Access to Work programme, as well as to employers who employ them.

I assure the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) that each and every year we increase our investment in benefits for disabled people and those with health conditions. This year alone we are spending more than £50 billion—more than the defence budget—and I am proud to be part of a Government who prioritise supporting disabled people. That is an increase of £7 billion since 2010. We are determined continuously to improve the processes and operation of the system that administers our disability benefits.

**Drew Hendry:** I hope that the Minister will also address the comments made by the Chancellor and distance herself from those. On her specific point, what does she say to those who have lost the severe disability allowance from their payments?

**Sarah Newton:** I was not going to dignify the hon. Gentleman’s remarks with a response, but since he has intervened on me I will not leave that point without comment. It is irresponsible of him deliberately to misrepresent what the Chancellor said at the Select Committee. We in this House all have a huge responsibility to be careful about what we say. We must honour the truth, and we must not make comments that scaremonger and will frighten some of the most vulnerable people.

**Drew Hendry rose—**

**Sarah Newton:** I will not give way. I have been generous in giving way, and I will not indulge the hon. Gentleman any more in pursuing things that he has misrepresented and quoted out of context.

Let me return to the spirit of the debate, which the hon. Gentleman’s colleague, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow set so well. The House came together to speak to disabled people outside the Chamber, to show how much we value them and to say how much more we want to do to enable them to play their part in society and to enable employers to take people on. I will return to the tone so ably set by the hon. Lady. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will respect his colleague and the tone that she set.

Last week, I visited North Devon District Hospital with the excellent local Member of Parliament. We met some young people who are doing really valued jobs in the hospital wards with patients and in vital support services, such as the engineering department. All those excellent young people had been supported by their local college and by Pluss through a Government-funded scheme. They were supported through work experience and placements in the hospital. The programme has been working for some five years. All the young people have learning disabilities, but their employers told me how valued they are. They were being employed not as an act of charity, but because of who they were.

I have the privilege, as Minister for Disabled People, to meet disabled people every week who do extraordinarily good work in every sort of workplace across the country. Just this morning, I was at Channel 4, which kindly hosted the first anniversary of our sector champions. Each sector champion is a leader in their industry and is working to improve access for disabled people to their industry, from financial services to retail, tourism, media and transport. Each sector leader is an inspirational leader in their field, driving real change in access for disabled people. They are doing that not just because it is the right thing to do, but because it makes good business sense.

There are an estimated 13 million disabled people in our country. Each year they spend an estimated £250 billion—the purple pound—so if businesses are not accessible they are missing out on a great deal of business. Accessibility, as Members have said, does not have to be expensive. Our sector champions are sharing best practice and information, so that more people are confident about employing disabled people. Disabled people are making huge contributions not only as consumers, but, as we have heard today, in all aspects of our society, including employment.

The Government are building a Britain fit for a future where no one is left behind. We have been very clear that we want our economy to harness the skills, talents and contributions of every person in society. We have made significant progress—there are now 600,000 more disabled people in work than there were four years ago—but we want to go further and faster. At the moment, even though our labour market is the strongest it has been for many years, with employment rates at record highs, we know that only half of all disabled people who would like to work are in work. New analysis shows that, over the course of a year, disabled people are twice as likely to fall out of work and almost three times less likely to move into work compared with non-disabled people. That is simply not acceptable.

**Jamie Stone:** Apropos of what the Minister has just said, does she agree that being disabled in a very remote area, such as my constituency, means that travelling to work poses very special and difficult challenges? The Government will have to think very carefully about that, so that my constituents are not disadvantaged.

**Sarah Newton:** The hon. Gentleman makes a really good point. I represent a constituency in Cornwall, so I completely empathise with the issue he raises. Access to work funding is available, including for transport to enable people to get to their place of employment. It is also very important that local enterprise partnerships work with local authorities to look at what more can be done to join up community transport with public transport. In areas such as the ones we represent, public transport is not as good a service as it is in urban areas, so there is more work to be done.

With more than one in six people of working age reporting a disability, it is really important that we do everything we can to make sure that their talents do not go to waste. That is why we have an urgent and comprehensive set of plans and actions. For example, we have a personal support package, some £330 million of funding, to arrange new interventions and initiatives for those in the WRAG, so that they can have tailor-made personal support to enable them to take the steps to work.
We have already recruited over 300 additional disability employment advisers, bringing special advice and support into the jobcentre. We have begun introducing 200 new community partners who are able to share their lived experience of disability across our jobcentre network.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: I am not going to take any more interventions, because I can see from the Chair a slight impatience. There is a second debate this afternoon and there are some points hon. Members have raised that I really need to address.

Our Work and Health programme has now launched. It has a contracted value of over £500 million to provide specialist support, including to disabled people. A very important point was raised this afternoon about the entrepreneurial spirit of disabled people. Our new enterprise allowance has helped nearly 20,000 disabled people to start up businesses. More than one in five of all businesses set up under the scheme are led by disabled people. We also have a small employer offer to help more disabled people into employment.

I encourage Members to read the “Improving Lives” Green Paper on the future of health and work, which sets out a very ambitious plan of detailed actions and investments the Government are taking, including in assistive technology. It is absolutely not what the hon. Member for Battersea said it was. We are not saying those things, which I am not going to repeat in this House because they are so fundamentally wrong. What we are about is recognising the talents of disabled people and making sure there are no barriers and no limits, so that their talents can take them as far as they possibly can.

I am absolutely delighted to say that the devolved Administrations are taking all sorts of different actions in different parts of the country. We are working very closely with the Scottish Government. We are jointly funding the Single Gateway project in Dundee and Fife, which is a really good and innovative programme. I am looking forward to working closely with it to see what lessons we can learn so that we can roll it out. It provides a single point of contact between the jobcentre, employers and disabled people. We will continue to work closely with the devolved Administrations to see what more we can do.

I again congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow on bringing this issue to the House. Achieving our ambition of seeing at least 1 million more disabled people in work requires all of us to work together. The Government of course have a role to play, but so too do employers, the health service, local authorities, charities and the voluntary sector.

MPs have convening powers and the power of championing in their local community. All have vital roles to play. I hope they will support me and the Government in delivering our very ambitious vision for a society in which disabled people can play their full part and go as far as their talents will take them.

2.38 pm

Dr Cameron: I thank all Members, from across the House, who have taken part in this extremely important debate. We have done it justice, but this is just a starting point for the work ahead that we take together. I am extremely keen that people become Disability Confident employers. I encourage MPs to do that and to hold Disability Confident events in their constituencies to encourage local employers. I pay particular tribute to Mr Speaker, who has created an internship scheme, to run over the next five years, for people with disabilities to come and work in Parliament with MPs. It is extremely important that Parliament is a role model that leads the way and that we do not just talk the but walk the walk. He is a shining example in that regard. We are, as we have heard today, in politics to make a difference to enable. Together we can create the inclusive society that everyone deserves.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House recognises the potential talent pool within the disabled community; notes that there will be an employment gap after the UK leaves the EU and that there is ample opportunity to include disabled workers in economic growth; calls on the Government to act immediately on its commitment to get one million more disabled people into employment by 2027; and further calls on the Government to increase awareness within the business community of the benefits of employing an inclusive workforce.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We now come to the Back-Bench debate on cancer strategy. Before we begin, I remind hon. Members—some of the offenders have just left the Chamber—that we do not have unlimited time in this place. I did not impose a time limit in the last debate because I thought it would run naturally to finish about 15 minutes ago. It did not; it overrun. The mover of the motion, all three Front-Bench speakers and two other Members significantly exceeded the time they ought to have taken. I was hoping that in a good-natured debate we might have some self-regulation, but that did not happen. In the next debate, therefore, I may have to impose time limits. Members in the next debate will have less time to speak because their colleagues in the last debate took longer than they ought to have. I will leave it to hon. Members—some of the offenders have left the Chamber, but I will find them later—to act honourably. As I call Dr Lisa Cameron, who is working very hard this afternoon, to move the next motion, I hope that she will do so in 15 minutes or less.
Cancer Strategy

2.41 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Cancer Strategy.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your guidance. I will try to behave much better timewise in this debate, which it is an honour and a privilege to introduce. I pay tribute to the Backbench Business Committee for enabling the debate, to the all-party parliamentary group on cancer for its timely and extremely important report and, in particular, to the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), who could not be with us today but deserves our thanks for the extraordinary amount of work he has done on this issue.

We in the House are all on the same side against cancer and in our ambition to achieve world-class cancer outcomes. My speech will address—briefly, according to your instructions, Madam Deputy Speaker—the recommendations of the all-party group’s recent report, “Progress of the England Cancer Strategy”. The report received more than 80 contributions from charities and bodies and truly reflects the passion in the sector, but it is also a cry for help, progress and a positive way forward. My speech will address the report’s four main areas of concern: workforce strategy, data, transparency and funding. It is open to colleagues to raise all aspects of cancer care and treatment, but, on behalf of the all-party group and the hon. Gentleman, I will stick to the recommendations in the report.

The report considers progress as we reach the halfway point of the NHS cancer strategy 2015-20 and is the result of an inquiry that the all-party group held last summer and autumn. The inquiry was formally launched at a summer reception last July and the number of written submissions was far larger than anticipated, showing the dedication of those working in the field. Many submissions came from cancer alliances and others on the frontline of the services being provided and identified many pressures and challenges. The evidence from frontline services in particular seemed to amount to a call for help. In its report, the all-party group concluded that although progress had been made since it is an honour and a privilege to introduce. I pay tribute to the Backbench Business Committee for enabling the debate, to the all-party parliamentary group on cancer for its timely and extremely important report and, in particular, to the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), who could not be with us today but deserves our thanks for the extraordinary amount of work he has done on this issue.

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Furthermore, for specific cancers such as breast cancer, there are key priorities for delivery in the cancer strategy. It must ensure that data are collected for people living with incurable secondary cancer; that everyone with secondary breast cancer has a specialist nurse with the right skills and expertise; and that everyone has access to the right support after finishing treatment for primary cancer, so that they are able to live well after breast cancer. We should not ignore the fact that the strategy has had positive effects. In the last year, 16 cancer alliances and three vanguards have been established, and £200 million has been made available to them for earlier diagnosis and post-diagnosis support. In addition, 23 NHS trusts have now received new and upgraded radiotherapy machines. However, as the report makes clear, much more work still needs to be done.

In the few minutes that I have left, I want to speak a bit more about less survivable cancers. The Less Survivable Cancers Taskforce was in touch with me prior to today’s debate. It is made up of Pancreatic Cancer UK, the British Liver Trust, the Brain Tumour Charity and Action Against Heartburn, covering oesophageal cancer, and Core, covering all digestive diseases. The staggering 55% gap in morbidity is absolutely unacceptable. Much, much more must be done. Recently, I lost a very dear uncle to pancreatic cancer. As a family going through that experience, we know that we need much more research and much more specialist understanding. We need investment in those areas—it is absolutely crucial. I want to ensure that other families have a better chance of an improved survival rate, and I pay tribute to my own uncle for his courage in coping with that condition right to the end.

Hospice care is also absolutely essential. We must ensure that families and patients have dignity at the end of life. That is imperative. I have watched far too many family members die in hospital beds, surrounded by other patients with the curtain screens drawn, to know that that is not dignified and that where possible, we must improve services and access to hospice care.

I pay tribute to the Teenage Cancer Trust—we often think of cancer as an illness that affects older people, but young people are also diagnosed with cancer—which does fantastic work. Vanessa Todd in my constituency is an absolute advocate for the Teenage Cancer Trust. Although GPs may not expect a young person to come with such symptoms, which are perhaps not easily identifiable, it is something that we can increase awareness of to make sure that diagnosis is very quick and timely for young people to improve their prognosis.

I thank everybody and, again, I thank the all-party group. It has been a privilege to open the debate for the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay, who leads the group on these issues so well.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Before I call the next speaker, I say to hon. Members that I am going to try to continue my experiment of seeing whether people will self-regulate and behave in a decent, honourable fashion. That means taking eight to nine minutes, and not 13, 14 or 15 minutes. I trust the well experienced Mr David Tredinnick to do so first.

2.54 pm

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): It is an honour to be called to speak first from the Government Benches, Madam Deputy Speaker. I heard what you said about time and intend to respect it.

On 25 January, in the other place—the House of Lords as we tend to call it now—a very distinguished former Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and former Minister for the Olympics, someone who did much to bring the Olympics to London, Tessa Jowell, now Baroness Jowell, made an impassioned speech about the brain tumour from which she is suffering. That is something with which I can identify. I do not usually talk about family matters, but I will share with the House that my sister died of a brain tumour.

What Baroness Jowell said in her speech should be marked well by the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who has, I know, a strong interest in cancer. She said:

“For what would every cancer patient want? First, to know that the best, the latest science was being used and available for them…What else would they want? They need to know that they have a community around them, supporting and caring, being practical and kind. While doctors look at the big picture, we can all be a part of the human-sized picture.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 25 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1170.]

Yesterday at the all-party group on cancer, of which I have the honour of being a vice-chair, one of the things we looked at was recovery packages, which are very dear to my heart as the Member who has chaired the all-party group for integrated healthcare for much of the 30 years for which I have been in this House. My researcher, who has worked with me for 20 years, told me today that I have chaired more than 120 meetings of that group. Over the years, among other things, we have tried to look at how to support cancer patients in a broader way.

Let me share a figure with the House straight away. In the United Kingdom, according to Cancer Research UK, 33% of those who have cancer use some sort of additional support therapy, often complimentary therapy. For some types of cancer, such as breast cancer, this number is even higher, at almost 50%. People use these treatments because when used alongside conventional cancer treatments such as radiotherapy or chemotherapy, they make it easier for them to cope with the cancer and to feel that they play a part in how they cope. Such treatments help them relax, reduce stress, enable them to take a more active role in their treatment and recovery in partnership with their therapist, and enable them to feel more in control of their feelings and emotions. There is very strong evidence that these therapies work effectively, although more research is always welcome. The use of acupuncture to relieve sickness caused by some chemotherapy drugs is now well established, as well as to relieve a sore mouth after having treatment for head and neck cancer.

Not far from here, there are three good examples of how these additional therapies have helped. At Guy’s and St Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust, the outpatient clinic offers aromatherapy, massage, reflexology and reiki. Quantitative data analysis shows a statistically significant improvement. At the Royal Marsden, a world-renowned hospital not far from here, aromatherapy massage has been used on 1,000 patients to date. At the Full Circle Fund Therapies clinic at St George’s University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, they are using reflexology, massage therapy and relaxation training. Professor Ted Gordon-Smith, professor of haematology there, said that the “Full Circle Fund therapy team has made a fantastic difference to the wellbeing of our patients.” There are other citations.
George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I know, having been a Health Minister, of my hon. Friend’s assiduous commitment to this cause. He mentioned the noble Baroness, Lordess Warsi. Does he agree that, with the sight of her and the Prime Minister together embracing, the Prime Minister’s announcement of £40 million for brain cancer is good news and that that is being done in the spirit of cross-party commitment to tackling disease? It will give a lot of hope to that community.

On the point about alternative therapies, does my hon. Friend agree that it is very important that the medical community and, through the Government, the National Institute for Health Research do the research to examine those therapies? Although they might not be rooted in a tradition of empirical science, if there is data that shows that they help patients’ recovery time, that is worthy of consideration.

David Tredinnick: My hon. Friend has helped me on my path. Various trials have taken place: randomised control trials, observational studies and quality-of-life studies. The person who came up with the notion of evidence-based medicine, Professor Sackett, said:

“The practice of evidence-based medicine means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence”.

In plain language, that means, “You have to look at the patient and see what the patient thinks and what the patient’s experience is.” We are often told by Ministers and others that we need more evidence—that there must be evidence. The trouble is that when evidence is produced on the basis of proper trials, it is often ignored.

The subject on which I have chosen to focus this afternoon is healing—therapeutic touch; call it what you like. There is very good evidence that people are able to use their hands to transfer some kind of energy. I have studied reiki myself—I have done it twice—as well as another Japanese tradition. I once ended up speaking to 5,000 therapists at a conference in Japan, believe it or not, many years ago.

According to Cancer Research UK, a study conducted in 2007 found that up to 40% of people in America used some kind of what they termed spiritual healing. In this country, there is good evidence to suggest that seeing a healer helps people. In the UK, long-term hormone therapy for women with breast cancer can be enhanced and patients can be helped if they are given healing therapy for the side-effects of their treatment. A study showed that a number of women who were given the therapy for 10 weeks experienced fewer side-effects.

In the national health service, there was a two-year trial involving 200 hospital patients with long-standing illnesses. It was the largest clinical trial of its kind, and was funded by the national lottery and supervised by the University of Birmingham, a Russell Group university known for its first-rate research. The methodology was used to assess the effectiveness of healing in dealing with irritable bowel system and inflammatory bowel disease in 200 patients. After the assessment, the Measure Yourself Medical Outcome Profile showed a significant improvement after six, 12 and 24 weeks.

That trial was scientific and properly carried out, and I think that if healing worked for those problems, it would almost certainly work for cancer. I suggest to my hon. Friend the Minister that if a drug showed the same results, especially at such minimal costs, it would be recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. More research and trials are needed.

Some of the Government’s efforts to bring about more rigorous assessments of therapies have involved the Professional Standards Authority, which was set up to oversee the UK’s nine health and care professional regulatory bodies. It was previously known as the Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence. In February 2013, it launched a Government-backed accredited register scheme. There are now 24 accredited registers covering 31 occupations and 80,000 practitioners. They include the Association of Child Psychotherapists, the British Acupuncture Council, the British Association of Sport Rehabilitators and Trainers, the Federation of Holistic Therapists, the National Hypnotherapy Society, and many others. In its summary, Harry Clayton, chief executive of the Professional Standards Authority, said that “a key recommendation is for practitioners” whom the PSA is regulating “to have the authority to make direct NHS referrals—in appropriate cases—thereby reducing the administrative burden on GP surgeries.”

I ask the Minister to take note of that: it is saying that practitioners on that PSA register should have the authority to make direct NHS referrals. If that were possible, we would bring into the service 30,000 practitioners.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am trying to figure out how long I have been speaking for; perhaps you can guide me.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I can guide the hon. Gentleman: about 11 minutes to date, but he has taken a few interventions. Therefore, I am not compelling him to sit down, but I am sure he will conclude quite soon.

David Tredinnick: I conclude by saying that I am encouraged that Leicester’s hospitals have entered into a memorandum of understanding with the Affiliated Hospital of Nantong University in China. The agreement intends to promote co-operation on medical research, training and education between the institutions.

I have used Chinese medicine for 20 years, and I believe—from that and from the testimonials I have received—that the use of acupuncture to increase the flow of energy in the body and the use of herbal medicine dramatically increase the sense of wellbeing of those who suffer from cancer and frequently extend their lifespan. I commend the hospitals of Leicestershire for discussing this with the authorities in China, to look at the possibility of training therapists in Chinese therapy. I rest my case.

3.6 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick), who made an interesting speech. I also thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for securing this important debate.

We all know someone who has had, or has been affected by, cancer. My family is no exception: both my parents had cancer and my husband lives with cancer every day of his life, and I could talk about cancer forever—but, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will try to limit myself to the recommended time.
The cancer strategy sets out strategic priorities and recommendations that aim to improve radically the outcomes that the NHS delivers for people affected by cancer, yet we also know that the specific needs of blood cancer patients are not being fully met by the cancer strategy. That is primarily because the experience of blood cancer patients is different from that of solid tumour cancer patients, so general cancer services are not always effective in meeting their needs.

These unmet needs occur in a number of priority areas identified in the cancer strategy, including awareness and early diagnosis, patient experience, living with and beyond cancer, access to new treatments and research, and NHS commissioning. Today, I want to focus on one particular issue: the need to improve post stem cell transplant care for blood cancer patients. This issue overlaps with a number of the aforementioned priority areas: patient experience, living with and beyond cancer, and NHS commissioning.

It is estimated that by 2020 there will be more than 16,000 people in the UK living post transplant, many of whom will be experiencing both physical and psychological side-effects from their treatment which can last for months or even years. The side-effects can include graft versus host disease, second cancers, infertility, depression, isolation and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Unfortunately, we know that there are worrying gaps in the care and support available to stem cell transplant patients after treatment. It is particularly concerning that only half of those who need psychological support actually receive it. The same is true for practical support: one in five are not offered any specialist care to help with elements of their physical recovery. These statistics are reflected in the experiences of many blood cancer patients, who feel that the level of support available to them falls away when they are sent home after their transplant. They feel that they have no one to talk to about the effects of the transplant, the challenges of late complications, the psychological burden of living with and beyond cancer and its treatment, their dietary needs, their infertility problems or practical issues such as when they can start to resume the everyday activities that they enjoyed before their treatment started.

This is happening because the commissioning of post transplant services is simply not working for every patient. After 100 days, responsibility transfers from NHS England to the clinical commissioning groups, but evidence suggests that this arbitrary cut-off can lead to fragmentation and gaps in the care and support offered to patients. To remedy this situation, there must be a review of the 100-day cut-off, as well as of the care currently provided to patients after a stem cell transplant, to ensure that all patients can access the support they need. This includes ensuring that all patients have access to appropriate emotional and psychological support services and to a clinical nurse specialist or the equivalent model of support, both of which are pledges in the cancer strategy.

This issue very much ties into what the cancer strategy says about the commissioning of cancer services being “highly fragmented”. The strategy recommended “setting clearer expectations, by the end of 2015, for how cancer services should be commissioned”, and as we head rapidly towards 2020, it is important that we continue to work hard to resolve the confusion that still exists. I hope that the Minister will be able to update us on how work in that area is progressing.

I have outlined just a few of the priority areas where much more needs to be done to ensure that blood cancers and the needs of blood cancer patients are appropriately addressed by the cancer strategy. I believe that thorough and robust action in these and a number of other key areas will have a significant impact on outcomes for blood cancer patients, improving care on their journey from diagnosis to treatment and through to recovery.

3.12 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I am delighted to be taking part in today’s debate. I know that this is an important area for the Government. I congratulate the members of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer on securing time for the debate today. Since 2010, the Government have recognised the need to improve cancer services offered by the NHS and to make the UK a world leader in cancer research, diagnosis, treatment and care. Many innovations have been introduced, including the cancer drugs fund and the implementation of the independent cancer taskforce’s strategy. Cancer survival rates are at a record high, and access to the world’s leading cancer drugs continues to improve. It is clear that a lot of great work is already being done.

I would like to focus specifically on breast cancer. It has been a real honour for me to be co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer for the past three years. This has given me the chance to meet and work with a range of really inspirational people, from patients through to clinicians. It is great to see two former chairs of the group representing both Front Benches here today. During his time as chair, the Minister in particular did some really good work on age-related risk, and it is good to see that he is carrying that on. I hope that we will be able to tempt him to talk about some of the work he is doing when he speaks later.

As we know, breast cancer is the UK’s most common cancer, with 11,500 women and 80 men dying from the disease this year. That said, great strides are being made in diagnosis and treatment, leading to survival rates doubling in the past 40 years. One of the key recommendations in the cancer strategy is on early diagnosis, with a target that, by 2020, 95% of patients will be diagnosed and receive results within four weeks. I want to concentrate my remarks on an area that is critical to achieving that ambition and that is often referred to as the biggest breast cancer risk that women are not aware of—namely, breast density.

During my work with the APPG, issues surrounding breast density have become clear, particularly the increased risk and the masking of cancers in mammography. Mammograms are obviously the main method of national screening and, while considered the gold standard, evidence shows that they are not as effective for women with dense breasts. Before I move on, it is important to understand the implications of breast density. It is not uncommon, with 40% of women aged over 40 having dense breast tissue. Although it is completely normal to have, it is also a well-established predictor of developing breast cancer. Women with the highest density are between four and six times more likely to develop the disease than those with less dense breasts.

The challenge is that tumours show up as white on a mammogram, but so does the dense tissue, meaning that the cancer is missed in more than 50% of cases.
To illustrate the significance of that, it is useful to recount a couple of examples given to me by patients that highlight the importance of the issue and the differences in approach by country. One lady living in the UK underwent mammogram screening from 2004 to 2012, receiving a clean bill of health each time. Shortly after her fourth mammogram, she found a lump, which was later found to be 7 cm in size and had been missed for over 10 years due to her breast tissue being 75% dense. She underwent a mastectomy and, as a result of her illness, was forced to give up her business. Six years later, she continues to undergo breast construction surgery. Compare that experience with that of another patient I met who lives in France. In 2016, her first ever mammogram was clear. However, as she was also diagnosed as having dense tissue, she was immediately referred for an ultrasound scan, which revealed an 8 mm invasive tumour. As a result of the early detection, she received minimal treatment and an extremely positive outcome. Sad ly, the first experience is not unusual, with 3,500 breast cancers going undetected each year in the UK alone.

I am aware that there is a global movement to educate not only women, but also health professionals about the implications of density, with a view to ultimately saving lives by promoting earlier diagnosis, so that tumours can be found when they are small. In the USA, 30 states have passed legislation to provide women with some level of information on breast density, detailing the increased risk they face and how effective mammograms are likely to be for them. Having raised it with the Minister previously, I know that he has a great deal of interest in this area, and it is pleasing that some action is already being taken in the UK, with the Government commissioning research from the University of Warwick. However, clear evidence shows that high breast density eclipses family history as a risk factor for actually developing breast cancer.

What are the solutions? In an ideal world, the answer would be to change screening guidelines and offer further screening to those women at risk. For changes on this scale, I appreciate that we need to await the outcome of the research so that long-term decisions can be reached, but a relatively straightforward solution can be achieved right now. We should not ignore the breast cancer experts in the UK, who are already educating about breast density, as there is a definite need to promote awareness not only to women, but health professionals, including GPs, who are the usual first port of call for women concerned about their health. The simple task of educating about breast density can potentially promote more positive health outcomes, lead to less harsh treatments, reduce mastectomies, avoid secondary cancers and, ultimately, save lives.

In conclusion, I have learned an awful lot about breast density over the past two years, and I would like to think that more people will be informed about its potential impact as a result of today’s debate. However, the following questions remain. Do the women in your family or among your friends know the risk from breast density? Does your mother, wife, sister or daughter know that a clear mammogram may not actually be clear? Those potentially life-saving pieces of information should be available to every single woman to ensure that the Government’s excellent ambition to deliver world class cancer outcomes and even better cancer survival rates can be achieved.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey), who reminds us of the importance of using the expertise and knowledge we have in the system to accelerate improvements in outcomes.

I thank the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), who I know is disappointed not to be here, for securing the debate and for his time and dedication in chairing the all-party parliamentary group on cancer so well and so impressively over the past nine years.

This debate focuses on the cancer strategy and the current challenges it faces. It is important to reflect on the positives, too. In the space of my lifetime, the progress on understanding, diagnosing and treating cancer has been remarkable. In the 1950s, there was limited knowledge of cancer and of the associated risk factors, the NHS had only recently emerged and there was no co-ordinated plan to treat cancer. We have come a very long way since those early days.

Cancer survival rates have doubled in the UK since the 1970s, which is a real credit to the countless health professionals, researchers, volunteers, charities and, of course, patients who have pioneered progress and who continue to do so every day. It is because of them that we are where we are today, where a person in the UK is more likely to survive cancer than to die from it.

However, massive challenges remain. My constituent Maggie Watts came to see me after losing her husband, Kevin, to pancreatic cancer in 2009. It is her fault that I have ended up as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on pancreatic cancer—thank you, Maggie. Kevin’s mother died of pancreatic cancer 40 years earlier, and the shocking thing is that Kevin’s chances of survival were no better than his mother’s. In most parts of life, the world has moved on rapidly in 40 years, but it has not done so in that part. In fact, at less than 7% in the UK, pancreatic cancer has the worst five-year survival rate of the 20 most common cancers, with the UK ranked 26th out of the 27 EU countries, according to the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry. Sadly, pancreatic cancer is on course to become the fourth biggest cancer killer by 2026, so action is needed now.

George Freeman: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, if we are to tackle such cancer outliers, it is vital that, as well as the great research we do in the UK, we make sure that the NHS is better at adopting and taking up innovative medicines? A large part of the accelerated access review, the genomics programme and the informatics programme is about making sure that the NHS is capable not just of doing the research but of enlightened procurement to take up more quickly the drugs that work.

Nic Dakin: Absolutely, and I will come on to that later.

As the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr. Cameron), who introduced the debate so well, pointed out, we are now almost halfway into the five-year implementation plan of the Government’s cancer strategy for England. At this mid-point, there are concerns about the rate of progress being made, and the workforce plan is not yet as effective as we would wish.

For example, as the Royal College of Pathologists has said, it can take up to 15 years to train a pathologist. Pathology services are unable to recruit to vacant
posts today, and it is anticipated that a third of consultant histopathologists will retire in the next five years, which is just one example of the challenges we face.

The lack of workforce capacity must be addressed to change survival outcomes for pancreatic cancer patients. It would be good if the Minister were able to update us on what his Department is doing to prioritise workforce planning and to provide the funding needed, based on England’s cancer workforce plan.

Fast access to quick and accurate diagnostic tests is also crucial. Many pancreatic cancer patients are diagnosed too late, when surgery—the only curative option—is no longer available. The early diagnosis inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on pancreatic cancer, “Time to Change the Story,” heard anecdotal evidence from a healthcare professional that a CT scan can be done quite quickly but that the report can sometimes take 10 weeks. It would be helpful if the Department were able to respond to the recommendations of the all-party group’s report and to update us on the progress being made in that area.

The diagnosis of not only pancreatic cancer but other cancers, such as blood cancer, can be complex because symptoms such as back pain or tiredness are often misunderstood or misdiagnosed. Delays in blood cancer diagnosis can have a major impact on a patient’s quality of life and overall outcome, and earlier diagnosis would make a difference for many, but not all, blood cancers.

To change this, recommendations for early diagnosis in the cancer strategy should be reviewed to ensure that all people with blood cancer are benefiting from early, accurate diagnosis. GPs could be encouraged to ask for a simple blood test for people displaying one or more blood cancer symptoms.

Diagnostic techniques also have the potential to guide what treatment options are likely to be effective. Last month, NICE provisionally rejected the use of five tumour profiling tests to guide treatment decisions on whether patients with a particular type of early breast cancer should also receive chemotherapy following surgery, reversing its previous guidance recommending Oncotype DX as an option. This goes to the heart of the point made by the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) about using genomics effectively and precisely. Breast Cancer Now is concerned that this could be a backwards step for some breast cancer patients, especially in the context of the current cancer strategy’s welcome ambition to enable more personalised treatment.

George Freeman: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that on this subject of accelerated, earlier diagnosis and treatment, the work of the Institute of Translational Medicine in Birmingham, led by Professor Charlie Craddock, and the Cure Leukaemia team, working on blood cancers, has written the playbook on how we do early diagnosis? They have pulled in £200 million of free drugs for NHS patients by doing accelerated access.

Nic Dakin: There is some wonderful work going on, and this goes back to what the hon. Member for North Warwickshire said about the need to grab this wonderful work and move it forward, and not be held back by frameworks that are not quick enough to move with the times.

The ability to personalise treatment based on tumour profiling, which would allow many women to avoid the gruelling side effects of chemotherapy, is an essential part of improving patient care and has the potential to reduce costs associated with chemotherapy—that is a win-win. It can also give both clinicians and patients invaluable reassurance that they may safely not have chemotherapy, thus reducing overtreatment. NICE has not communicated clearly enough the reasons behind provisionally rejecting the future use of the Oncotype DX tumour profiling test, as it is unclear whether this is a result of additional clinical evidence, the cost or a combination of both. Will the Minister ask NICE to clarify the clinical and economic drivers behind the recent provisional rejection of tumour profiling tests to guide treatment decisions in a specific group of breast cancer patients?

The cancer strategy calls on Public Health England to continue to invest in “Be Clear on Cancer” campaigns to raise awareness of possible symptoms of cancer. Symptom awareness is a big challenge in terms of pancreatic cancer, as well as other cancers. A ComRes poll carried out by Pancreatic Cancer UK in 2017 found that 35% of adults in the UK would not be worried if they had a few of the potential symptoms of pancreatic cancer. Last year, Public Health England launched an exciting regional pilot on vague abdominal symptoms, including persistent diarrhoea, bloating and discomfort. Although the results for the campaign were positive, it has not yet been rolled out nationally. I would be keen to know when the Minister plans a national roll-out of the vague abdominal symptoms “Be Clear on Cancer” campaign.

In conclusion, much has been done and much is happening, but there is much more to do. Cancer alliances have a significant role to play in delivering effective change, and many are clearly making a difference. Workforce planning, early diagnosis and greater symptom awareness are key areas where we need to up our game as we move into the second half of this five-year cancer strategy.

3.28 pm

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I, too, thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for securing this debate. I would like to take this opportunity to discuss blood cancer in particular.

As many will know, there are different types of blood cancer, ranging from leukaemia, lymphoma and myeloma to the rarest blood cancers, which affect just a few people. Blood cancer is a complex and much misunderstood disease. According to Cancer Research UK, blood cancer is the third biggest cancer killer in the UK and the fifth most common cancer overall, with more than 230,000 people living with blood cancer. Compared with patients suffering from other cancers, those blood cancer patients had to see their GP significantly more times before being referred to hospital. More than 35% had to see their GP three or more times before referral, which compares with only 6% for breast cancer and 23% for other solid tumour types. According to the Office for National Statistics, blood cancer is by far the most common cancer among people aged under 30. Despite that, a number of issues with blood cancer still need to be addressed.

As the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) said, diagnosing can be very complex at times. Symptoms such as back pain or tiredness are often misunderstood and diagnosed as other conditions. Delays can lead to
major problems for patients in terms of not only their quality of life but the overall outcome. Recommendations in the cancer strategy for early diagnosis should be reviewed to ensure that all people with blood cancer benefit from early and accurate diagnosis. GPs should be encouraged to ask for simple blood tests for people displaying one or more blood cancer symptoms.

The cancer strategy says that all cancer patients will have had access to the recovery package by 2020. The package helps people, once their treatment has ended, to return to their normal lives. It includes a health needs assessment, care planning, health and wellbeing events, and a review of cancer care. However, the package is based around the needs of people with solid tumour cancers. In recent survey responses, people with chronic leukaemia, relapsing myeloma or lymphoma have said that terms such as “beyond cancer” and “post-treatment” are not applicable to them. To ensure that people with blood cancer receive sufficient ongoing support, will my hon. Friend the Minister consider how all blood cancer patients can benefit from aftercare support, including by ensuring that the recovery package takes account of the unique characteristics of blood cancer?

Five thousand people a year with some slow-growing blood cancers are put on a regime of watch and wait instead of starting treatment straightaway. Their cancer is monitored for potentially many years before it has progressed to a point where treatment needs to start. Being monitored in this way can be difficult for many patients, and it can lead to psychological distress. Tailored psychological support must be made available to those patients on watch and wait.

Unlike with the treatment of solid tumour cancers, blood cancers are often not treatable through the use of surgery or radiotherapy. This means that blood cancer is more dependent on the development of new drugs and the ability to access them, and those things are very important if we are to continue improving patient outcomes. Continued Government investment in blood cancer research, including in clinical trials infrastructure, is required to capitalise on the UK’s position as a leader in blood cancer research. That will deliver benefits for patients, but it will also help the Government to reach the ambitions outlined in the UK life sciences industrial strategy.

The cancer strategy sets out how clinical leaders should work together in cancer alliances with those affected by cancer to decide how local care and services should be delivered. Despite this ambition, patients often find that services are fragmented, which adds stress to their experience. That can be a particular problem with blood cancer, because patients are often treated in haematology rather than oncology units. Cancer alliances should reduce fragmentation between the different stages of care for blood cancer patients by acknowledging and bridging the recognised gaps between oncology and haematology departments and between primary and secondary care.

To conclude, the cancer dashboard has been developed following a recommendation in the cancer strategy. It allows clinicians and others to compare the performance of clinical commissioning groups and to identify areas for improvement. However, it covers only the four most common solid tumour types: lung, breast, prostate and colorectal. That equates to less than half of all cancer cases. Will the Minister provide an assurance that the health service will actively work to include blood cancer in the cancer dashboard, as the fifth most common cancer, and to ensure that decisions about future services do not disregard these patients?

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), who spoke so passionately and knowledgeably for better understanding, treatment and diagnosis of blood cancer.

Like everyone in the House, I could speak about many aspects of cancer, including my own experience. I could speak about the very moving speech made by Baroness Jowell in the other place—a very special moment in Parliament’s history, and one I will always be glad to have been there for, although I am very sad that she had to be there. I could speak about how horrible chemotherapy is and about how deeply a girl can feel the loss of her eyelashes, for example. I could speak about my support for health labelling for alcohol, as so few people are aware of the connections between alcohol and breast, bowel and other cancers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine) indicated assent.

Thangam Debbonaire: The Minister is nodding vigorously from a sedentary position, and I hope that means he will support better labelling.

I could speak about how important healthy habits are generally for reducing cancer, and again I ask the Minister to do more to urge people to take up those healthy habits from an early age. I could speak about how all women should learn how to check their breasts properly, because so many have told me that they do not how to do that. I could talk about what I learned last week in CERN, of all places, where the Large Hadron Collider is, about the contribution that that scientific institute has made to improving diagnoses of cancer. I could mention, for instance, the development of the MRI—the magnetic resonance imaging—machine. I spoke to scientists there who, I am glad to say, are doing what they can to reduce the very frightening knocking that happens when a person is inside the machine. However, today, I am going to speak about the patient experience of a very specific group—children and young people with cancer and their families.

I say to those children and young people, their parents, their brothers and sisters, their clinicians and the charities supporting them, who may be listening, that this speech is for you. I pay tribute to all the other charities, too numerous to mention, that help children and young people with cancer every day. I want to give a very personal thanks to my sister-in-law Emilee, whose volunteering, fundraising and work for CLIC Sargent is an inspiration to so many and whose personal knowledge has taught me so much.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I am a parent of a child who has had the support of CLIC Sargent. It is not only that the charity supports you from a medical point of view—the people you talk to actually understand what your child and you are going through.
Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely right: these specialist organisations understand not just what the patient is going through, but what the families are going through and how devastating a diagnosis can be. They also know what can be done to help people through it.

I set up the all-party parliamentary group on childhood and teenage cancer last year with the help of CLIC Sargent and the Teenage Cancer Trust, which provide the secretariat, because children and young people living with cancer and their parents told me that they want to have their voices heard in Parliament. I thank the officers, almost all of whom are here, for their work. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), for High Peak (Ruth George), the hon. Members for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their support.

Childhood cancers are, thankfully, rare. Just 4,000 children and young people under 25 are diagnosed with cancer each year in the UK, but this rarity means that they are very often difficult to diagnose and, therefore, much more likely than older patients to be diagnosed at emergency at a later stage. That also means that the treatment can be difficult and that children, young people and their parents have to travel a long way for specialist treatment. It can mean that treatment can be particularly and unpleasantly aggressive. There are consequences for children’s education and their future employment. The treatment may also affect their fertility—something that they may not even be thinking about at the time of diagnosis. It may cause a disability. It may set them apart from their friends at exactly the moment when they are just finding out who they are.

In Bristol, the Teenage Cancer Trust provides a specialist ward for teenage cancer patients—I thank everyone who works there. It is able to help teenagers and their parents to get through this difficult time with services that are tailored to their specific needs. CLIC Sargent provides specialist support, which, in Bristol, includes a home—not a house—for children and their families to live in and have care from while they are having treatment for cancer. Indeed, a parent I met when visiting the CLIC Sargent house told me of arriving in Bristol in the morning with nothing—apart from them and their child—expecting just a check-up, and by the evening discovering that their child had cancer and that the treatment was due to start immediately. The CLIC Sargent social worker in that case can explain what the house does and what the facilities are and help to guide people who are suddenly dealing with not only a really traumatic experience, but having no food, no clothes and no supplies for the next few days.

Two years ago, the “Cancer costs” report, the parliamentary launch of which I had the honour of hosting in autumn 2016, identified specific costs for families affected by childhood cancer. I urge the Minister to relook at that—I am sure that he has already seen it. Young people and parents at that launch told me that they wanted a voice, hence the formation of the all-party group. We are launching our first inquiry on Monday, looking at patient experience, and I know that the Minister will want to engage with that process as we go forward.

We want Parliament to better understand the really specific experience of children and young people with cancer and their families and to identify whether their needs are being met and where improvements can be made. For example, there might be suggestions for improvements to cancer diagnosis, post-treatment support, or help with the specific issue of the impact of the diagnosis that my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside mentioned, as well as all the other areas that I have listed.

Many of us here may have had contact with children with cancer or their parents in our constituency work. I say to those people: this inquiry is for you, but it is also about you and with you. Young people, parents and professionals can get involved from Monday by filling in the short online survey on the all-party group’s Twitter feed and website. They can find out more about the inquiry on the webpage if they just google “APPG young cancer”. Our lines of inquiry are also informed by what children, young people and parents have already told us, and we have young people involved in hearing and analysing evidence as well as giving it.

The Government have committed to collecting patient experience data for the under-16s, and research into how that can be undertaken is progressing. We are pleased to hear about that data collection, but I would like the Minister to consider how it might be improved and tell us a bit more about that.

Mark Tami: A few years ago, CLIC Sargent produced a report about children with cancer returning to school. That really highlighted some of the major problems and the lack of guidelines to give teachers a proper understanding. Particularly for children who are very young, it is difficult not only for the child with cancer but for the other children at the school, particularly girls who have seen their friend, who looked perfectly normal, without hair, or something like that. It is a very difficult situation. We need a proper system in place so that those children can be properly included rather than excluded.

Thangam Debbonaire: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know from my experience in my own circle exactly how that can affect not only the young person but their educators. Young people have spoken to me of really different experiences. Some have said that they had good support from their school, while others have been told, rather sadly, that they were upsetting their peers with their hairlessness. I find that really challenging, because a child or a young person with cancer is actually an opportunity for schoolteachers to work with young people on how they can not only support their friends but reduce their own risk through making healthy choices at that point.

I reiterate to all hon. Members in the House and beyond that, if they would like to get involved with the all-party group or this inquiry, they should please get in touch with me. If children, young people, parents or other family members also want their voice heard in the inquiry or in Parliament, they can contact the group or me, or their own MPs. I hope that the Government, and Parliament generally, will be willing to hear the voices, needs and experiences of children and young people with cancer, and their families. I am sure that everyone here is committed to that, but we really must actually do it.

3.42 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for securing this debate.
It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) in her passionate and very well-informed speech.

We all have loved ones who have been affected by cancer. I lost my maternal grandparents to breast cancer and oesophageal cancer. Many in my family have suffered from melanoma, including my mother, and one of my friends is currently battling cancer. We have all heard harrowing stories from constituents. Cancer is indiscriminate: it does not care whether you are young or old, or someone’s mother or brother. Yes, we can make dietary and lifestyle changes to try to avoid it, and be aware of the symptoms, but advances in medicine mean that we can fight it more effectively and detect it earlier to increase the odds of survival, although there are still no guarantees.

Cancer survival rates are at a record high, with about 7,000 people alive today who would have not have been had mortality rates been the same as in 2010. This is a fantastic step in the right direction, but we are not at our destination. That is the point that I want to labour. For all those who lose their mother or child or friend today and hear of this debate, I want them to know that the Government, and all MPs, do “get it”. We get that there are more of these debates, and more of these campaigns, such as “Be Clear on Cancer” are vital to raise awareness of early symptoms, especially of less common cancers. I welcome the increased investment in cancer research by the National Health Service and the National Cancer Research Institute. In 2010, there were 7 million more diagnostic tests than in 2010, and 57,000 more patients started cancer treatment.

The formation of the £1.2 billion cancer drugs fund in 2010 was a massive step forward and has helped more than 95,000 people to access the life-extending drugs that they need, as was the implementation of the independent cancer taskforce’s strategy, seeking to save a further 30,000 lives by 2020. As I said, we are on the right track. In 2010, we had some of the worst survival rates, yet we are now the best in Europe, but we are not closing that gap. I welcome the £1.2 billion cancer drugs fund, the faecal immunochemical test, known as FIT, which will be rolled out in April. It is more sensitive and accurate and can detect twice as many cancers as the current test. Currently only half of those invited to take part in bowel cancer testing do, but FIT is proven scientifically to increase the number participating in the programme, especially as it is easier and more hygienic to post than the current test.

However, new awareness of symptoms, coupled with the new test and the ageing population, is leading charities within the sector to voice concerns of a looming endoscopy workforce crisis. Bowel Cancer UK and Beating Bowel Cancer question the realism of getting 400 non-medical clinical staff by 2020 to carry out the 450,000 procedures, especially as only 48 have been trained so far. I would like to hear more from the Minister in response to that, so that my constituent can be assured that others may be diagnosed earlier than she was.

A key issue when it comes to beating cancer and preventing cancer is getting screened regularly when applicable. That is especially the case with cervical cancer. The NHS cervical screening programme in England offers screening to women aged 25 to 49 every three years and women aged 50 to 64 every five years. Every year in the UK, around 3,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer, but research shows that the number of women using the service has dropped to a 20-year low, with more than 1.2 million not attending their screening in the last year. A recent report by Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust showed that embarrassment is a key barrier to attendance for between a third and a half of all women, as is the desire not to miss work. There is also a severe lack of understanding about the importance of screening. Shockingly, one in three women aged between 25 and 29 miss their smear, yet cervical cancer is the most common cancer for women under 35. We must address this.

I note that Imperial College has conducted a trial to assess the effectiveness of texting non-responders to increase coverage, but I think that we should just do this—it can only help. I also welcome the fact that the Department of Health and Social Care’s behavioural insight team has undertaken a trial to investigate the use of behavioural insights to optimise the content of the invitation letter for cervical screenings.
I must admit that I was one of these women: I put off my screening for years. I left it at the bottom of my to-do list until I could fit it in around my job, and it just kept slipping year on year. I must admit, if I am honest, that I really did not realise that cervical cancer is most common in women under the age of 35. When I did have my screening, I had to go through the processes necessary after abnormal cells show up. As my results showed high-grade abnormalities, I am extremely thankful that I went when I did. I want to take this opportunity to praise the work of Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust, which provides women with information and support, which I found extremely helpful.

We seem to be very British about cervical smear tests. We do not really like to talk much about them, and that does not promote women going for them. Yes, it is not nice—it hurts a little, it is awkward and a bit embarrassing—but it could save your life. That is the message we need to get out. We need to promote cervical screening from school age, so that women recognise all the risks and the importance of getting from the age of 25.

In September and October 2017, Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust sent freedom of information requests to all upper-tier and unitary local authorities and clinical commissioning groups in England to ask what activities they had undertaken to increase cervical screening coverage from August 2016 to August 2017, along with the outcomes of those activities. Of the 149 local authorities that responded, 32% had not undertaken any activities at all. I ask the Minister to commission a review—and to adopt a strategy to increase the falling rate of cervical screenings—looking at availability and the challenges of reaching all women and at the need for awareness of cervical cancer.

To conclude, Macmillan claims that, by 2020, 47% of people will get cancer at some point in their life, which is almost one in two. That is the scale of the problem we face. While we have come so far since 2010 in terms of diagnosis and treatment, there is still so far to go.

3.52 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for bringing about this debate, which matters hugely to a lot of people.

Most of the speakers today will talk about the facts, figures and statistics, but I will talk about the impact of cancer on people behind the statistics. A lot of us in the Chamber have been affected by cancer. My daughter died at just 35 of breast cancer, and I will talk about cancer from a patient’s perspective. One in eight women develop breast cancer in their lifetime, and 80% survive for five years or more. About 95% of women will survive for one year, and my daughter survived for 13 months. Recent data show that 11,500 women and 80 men in the UK still die from breast cancer every year.

My Lynsey was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer in April 2010, and she died just 13 months later. She was a very bright girl, with a degree in politics and a degree in social work, and she worked with underprivileged children. She had a husband and three small children, who were two, four and seven when she died. She was treated at Nottingham City Hospital under Dr. Steve Chan—she had chemotherapy, radiotherapy and a mastectomy—and her treatment was just amazing. The staff just could not have been better. She came home for the final three weeks of her life to die, and the unqualified team that came in to support me and her husband, Mike, were just amazing as well. I can never thank them enough.

I want to talk a little about the information that Breast Cancer Now, a charity, has made available to me. I am an ambassador for it, because I decided that one of the things I wanted to do when I got elected was to be an ambassador for a breast cancer charity. It has said that “it will be challenging to meet the objectives set out in the Cancer Strategy unless corrective action is immediately taken”.

My Lynsey’s cancer was advanced—it was stage 3 when diagnosed, so screening probably would not have helped her. The Breast Cancer Now report states: “Breast screening is a key initiative to ensure the early detection and diagnosis of breast cancer. Although controversy still exists around over-diagnosis, its benefits are recognised to outweigh its risks in the Cancer Strategy, in detecting 30% of breast cancers and saving 1,300 lives a year from breast cancer.”

The report also talks about a shortage of staff—32% of radiologists are expected to retire between 2015 and 2025.

My daughter developed a brain tumour—a common secondary effect of breast cancer—and she had to go for radiotherapy. It is truly traumatic. She used to see flashing blue and white lights; she had to wear a mask. The really upsetting thing was that because of staff shortages, she often had to lie around on a trolley waiting for things. Imagine what it is like laying on a hospital trolley with cancer in your bone and metastasis—it is just so distressing. That is the effect on patients of short staffing. It is just a phrase in a report, but that is what it really means.

Breast Cancer Now’s report states: “We are also concerned about the lack of access to Clinical Nurse Specialists for secondary breast cancer patients: only 21% of organisations in England, Scotland and Wales report having one or more CNS dedicated to secondary breast cancer. We know that access to a CNS can make a big difference to the way people with cancer experience their care, providing patients with support and helping them manage their symptoms. This is especially important for patients—those like my Lynsey—with incurable secondary breast cancer who have particularly complex needs.”

Finally, Breast Cancer Now also said: “We have serious concerns about the future of the National Cancer Patient Experience Survey as a result of the introduction of a new opt-out model scheduled in May 2018. The CPES has been a key driver of the improvements in cancer patient outcomes and experience since 2010.”

It is the aspiration of Breast Cancer Now that by 2050, everybody who develops breast cancer will live. I used to say to my daughter, “I’ve had so much of my life, more than you. I wish it could be me.” She used to say, “Mum, I wish it could be no one.” As parliamentarians we have power to influence things and change them, so perhaps we can join together across the House and make Breast Cancer Now’s vision a reality, so that by 2050, nobody need die of breast cancer.

3.57 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for opening this debate on behalf of the
hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), and I pay tribute to his excellent work over many years as chair of the all-party group on cancer. I am delighted to support this debate, and as someone who has always taken a key interest in cancer strategy, I wish to highlight three issues. Pancreatic cancer has been well covered by my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), so I will refer to it only briefly. I also want to mention transformation funding and make a plea to the Minister, and I will say something about advance radiotherapy—a hobbyhorse of mine.

As hon. Members may be aware, I have recently recovered from a recurrence of lymphatic cancer, so I have first-hand knowledge of the importance of getting the cancer strategy right, not least in terms of early diagnosis and appropriate treatment. Delivering the recommendations set out in the cancer strategy is crucial to improving care and support for thousands of people affected by cancer. I do not seek to make a party political point about the nature of that policy, but essentially it requires resources, a plan, a strategy and commitment.

Sadly, pancreatic cancer has taken friends of mine, and it is particularly nasty. It has the worst five-year survival rate of the 20 most common cancers at less than 7% across the UK—a figure that has hardly changed over the past 40 years. In most other types of cancer, survivability has gone up. For pancreatic cancer, however, it has remained fairly flat. We urgently need investment and action, because pancreatic cancer is set, on current trajectory, to become the fourth biggest cancer killer by 2026. Currently, 80% of pancreatic cancer patients are diagnosed at the stage where the disease is advanced. Surgery is the only potential curative treatment, but sadly it is not an option when the disease is at an advanced stage. As far as I am aware, pancreas transplants are not an option. Early diagnosis is therefore absolutely key to improving the appalling survival rates and ensuring that patients are able to live longer following diagnosis.

I looked up the figures for my own area. Between 2010 and 2014, pancreatic cancer took the lives of 188 people in the Easington, Durham dales and Sedgefield clinical commissioning group area. It is clear that much more work is needed to deliver the kind of change we must see for the people affected, and their families, so we can achieve the improvements in survival rates that are so desperately needed.

Not long ago, I had the pleasure of visiting a local National Citizen Service group of young volunteers in my constituency—I think many Members have taken similar opportunities. The House might be interested to note that one group of young people were raising money for a chemotherapy ward because of their personal and family experiences. They thought that the facilities available were inadequate. This was because the ward, although filled with excellent and committed staff, was grappling with an increase in demand and a lack of funds. These young people raised enough money to buy an assortment of things, including floor fans to keep the patients cool. It is an indictment that, when we are putting additional money into the recovery fund and encouraging people to get through the treatment and to go on, we are relying on charitable donations.

At the Britain against Cancer conference 2016, the chief executive of NHS England announced £200 million of funding for treating cancer, along with improving early diagnosis and funding stratified pathways. The money was intended to support the roll-out of the recovery package. However, since this transformation funding was announced, there have been significant delays in its reaching cancer alliances, with only nine of 16 alliances having received funding. At the Britain against Cancer conference in December 2017, the Secretary of State for Health said that the release of funding to cancer alliances would be delayed in areas that were unable to demonstrate an improvement in their 62-day waiting time standard. That was an additional requirement that had not been included as part of the original criteria set during the bidding process.

Every person diagnosed with cancer—it does not matter where they live—should be able to rely on timely diagnosis and treatment when they are told they have cancer. However, as the final report from the all-party group on cancer’s inquiry concluded, the delayed release of funding to the cancer alliances has had a significant impact on their ability to make progress. I hope the Minister is paying attention, because I want to ask him a question.

Steve Brine: He is.

Grahame Morris: I am very glad to hear it, because this is a serious point. The Department of Health and Social Care must decouple the release of transformation funding to cancer alliances from progress against the 62-day waiting time standard. I hope the Minister will address that point in his remarks. [Interruption.] I look forward with anticipation to his remarks.

It would not be a contribution on health from me if I did not mention advanced radiotherapy. I have raised regularly its benefits and advocated further investment in its research. Investment and research, given the cost, should be evidence-based, but there are some really quite exciting areas: in particular, proton beam therapy—I visited University College Hospital in London for part of my treatment and saw the installation of the proton beam therapy bunker and equipment there; stereotactic ablative body radiotherapy; adaptive radiotherapy based on advanced imaging—a kind of magnetic resonance linear accelerator; combinations of radiotherapy and novel drugs; biomarkers with selections for altered radiotherapy strategies so that radiotherapy can precisely target the cancer cells; and molecular radiotherapy. It is necessary that we evaluate the use of these new radiotherapy techniques and compare them with conventional radiotherapy and some surgical techniques, as radiotherapy is sometimes more effective than surgery and pharmaceutical products. I am advocating that they be used not instead of, but alongside other treatments and following considerable evaluation. This could result in better outcomes and reduced treatment costs.

Finally, I would like to thank all my colleagues on the all-party group on cancer, the cancer charities that continue to do excellent work and all those in our national health service working in cancer prevention and treatment.

4.6 pm  
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing this debate, and I am grateful
ensure that everyone living with cancer across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can access the right care and support, whether that means information, financial assistance, vocational rehabilitation or emotional support. Families can give so much of that emotional support, and they do so gladly, but at the same time we need to reach outside that.

Just 68% of people with cancer in Northern Ireland started treatment within 62 days of referral. Again, I am very much in the early diagnosis category and we need that in place. Cancer deaths in Northern Ireland are at the highest level that they have ever been. My party is totally committed to improving the five-year survival rates and believes in targeting resources to tackle deprivation, which is another issue. Cancer incidence rates are higher where there is deprivation.

More needs to be done to provide good continuity of care and to ensure that all patients have supported access to key information about their condition, treatment options and the types of support that are available. Macmillan is funding a second Northern Ireland survey that will be launched in spring 2018. It has invested £7 million in the Northern Ireland specialist cancer nursing plan, because this vital segment of the cancer workforce is not keeping pace with demand. Macmillan recognises that there are shortcomings and it has tried to introduce finance where it can to ensure that things go the right way.

Cancer is the most common cause of death in Northern Ireland. The end-of-life choice is very important. The Northern Ireland cancer registry found that 75% of patients would prefer to die at home. That subject matter is not easy to speak about, but the fact is that this needs to be looked at. Macmillan’s research found that people are more likely to die in the place of their choice when their wishes are recorded and known by their healthcare team. We believe that a new cancer strategy should include commitments to improving end-of-life care and giving everyone who is diagnosed with cancer the opportunity to have advance care planning discussions.

Macmillan has made a number of recommendations, which I will conclude with—it is referred to as the “Delivering Together” strategy. I totally support Macmillan’s reforms, such as producing a detailed implementation plan, including specific actions to improve care and support for people living with cancer and to enhance the patient experience in all trusts and CCGs. It recommends making the recovery package available to everyone living with and beyond cancer, the timely adoption and implementation of NICE guidelines to improve cancer detection, treatment and support, and close working with GP federations to ensure that care is provided closer to home.

The recommendations include long-term cancer workforce planning, integrating health and social care with higher education to attain a more knowledgeable and skilled workforce—it is important to have that—and with effective recruitment and succession across disciplines and settings. They include the better integration and co-ordination of all those things as well, including signposting to the non-clinical support that patients need at each stage of their cancer journey and providing high-quality palliative end-of-life care in all settings on a 24/7 basis. That should begin with cancer patients having the option of advance care planning conversations.
at the earliest possible stage. The recommendations also include increasing the involvement of people affected by cancer in the development, redesign and delivery of services and a commitment to the ongoing routine use of data collection tools, including the cancer patient experience survey and the peer review programme, to identify any gaps or inequalities in cancer care and pinpoint areas for improvement locally and benchmarking across the UK.

I ask the Minister to take on board all the issues we have all referred to and to do what can be done to help the massive amount of cancer sufferers across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so that they have a better journey, a better outcome and better support.

4.14 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), who cannot be with us today, for being proactive in securing the debate this afternoon. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) who stepped in to open the debate in his absence. She raised concerns about targets not being set and the resources available to meet those targets, and reminded us all that those in receipt of treatment must be involved in the ongoing conversations. Their experience is vital in improving the process as we go forward. It is imperative that we improve end-of-life care to offer the dignity that is appropriate at that time.

The hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) spoke eloquently about alternative therapies and the role they can play. I would include in that category—although I am not putting words into his mouth—the investigation into the use of medicinal cannabis. The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) focused on post-stem cell transplant care and the practical support that is required and asked whether we could review the 100 day cut-off date.

The hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) spoke about breast cancer, the UK’s most common cancer, with a survival rate that has doubled in the past 20 years. He went on to highlight the question of dense tissue, something that was new to me, and the need for early diagnosis, and he called for better education in this area.

The hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) put out challenges about pancreatic cancer. Although progress has been made, this seems to be an area in which minimal progress has been made over the years. He drew attention to the workforce programme and asked whether NICE could possibly clarify some of its decisions.

The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) focused on blood cancer and the complexities around diagnosis, and called for continued clinical research. The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) spoke about young people and cancer and the role played by CLIC Sargent. Today I am proudly wearing my Glow Gold ribbon, given to me by a young man in my constituency this time last year.

The hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) highlighted the desire that the Government prioritise cancer research. We have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. She also highlighted the need for early diagnosis, a recurring theme this afternoon. The hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) spoke movingly about the people behind the statistics, including her own daughter. She also highlighted the reality of staff shortages and what they mean for patients.

The hon. Member for Easington (Graeme Morris) spoke of his first-hand knowledge of overcoming cancer, and as many speakers have said, survivors’ experiences should be hugely influential when developing better treatments. Who could possibly have a better understanding?

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned that every family is struck in some way by cancer. He also mentioned the financial implications, and I shall take up that topic later.

Despite our progress cancer remains a lingering, stubborn foe and as policy makers we have to support our respective health services as they seek to improve the treatment that patients receive. We have undoubtedly taken great strides and our progress from a historical perspective is one of steady improvement, but for individuals, months, weeks and even days become precious as they grapple with the uncertainties that this illness brings to their life.

While patients come to terms with the emotional and physical impact of their diagnosis, they must also continue to manage the everyday practicalities of life. Chief amongst these is finances, and research commissioned by Macmillan Cancer Support shows that four out of five people with cancer are, on average, £570 a month worse off as a result of their diagnosis. I believe we can improve that situation by introducing a duty of care for financial services, as that would allow cancer patients to have increased flexibility when dealing with organisations such as their bank.

It is clear that more needs to be done to give cancer sufferers greater security. The introduction of flexibility of mortgage payments, interest freezes on credit cards or signposted financial advice to avoid problem debts are just some of the ways in which banks may be able to assist. I would therefore encourage the UK Government to strongly consider the introduction of a legal duty of care as a matter of urgency, so that those recovering from cancer are afforded greater support.

I hope that, where possible, the different health services across the United Kingdom have satisfactory measures in place for the sharing of best practice. The Nuffield Trust, for example, concluded in a 2017 report that Scotland had a unique system for improving the quality and safety of patient care and that other health authorities in the UK could benefit from the approaches used in Scotland. Mark Dayan, the lead author of the report, stated that Scotland had

“worked on getting its healthcare services to co-operate for longer than the other nations of the UK. So we’re urging healthcare leaders from England, Wales and Northern Ireland to think about what elements they might want to import from Scotland.”

I am sure that those in the Scottish NHS will be watching with interest as the NHS in England continues to implement the Cancer Taskforce’s five-year strategy for cancer care. Shared knowledge is a vital tool for future progress.

Earlier this year, I hosted the world cancer day drop-in event, along with the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). It was heartening to listen to Cancer Research UK’s ambassadors and to reflect on the many unsung heroes who assist cancer sufferers or have
experience cancer themselves. I hope that the Government are listening to those in the third sector, because through their effort and commitment they have gathered a huge amount of valuable knowledge.

The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway talked about blood cancer, and the hon. Member for Bristol West talked about cancer in children. I want to combine the two by telling a story about a young man from my constituency—a very brave young man called Nathan Mowat. Nathan is now at the ripe old age of seven. With the love and support of his mum Gillian, dad Paul and sister Annabel, he has completed three years of treatment for lymphoblastic leukaemia, which he can pronounce a lot better than I can. He has experienced 10 different cocktails of chemotherapy, six bone marrow procedures, three surgeries, 22 lumbar punctures, and 16 blood and platelet transfusions. Nathan earns a “bead of courage” for every procedure that he goes through. He has earned 1,500 “beads of courage”. Where Nathan and other brave children have led, others will follow.

I hope that all Members will join me in reaffirming our commitment to three actions: considering legislation that will help to support cancer patients in different aspects of their life, including their personal finances, giving our health services the financial support that they require, and ensuring that the expertise and knowledge of academia around the globe are fully utilised to formulate Government policy.

4.22 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for leading the debate and for her excellent speech, and I thank the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for securing the debate. He is not in the Chamber, but I also want to thank him for the excellent contribution that he has made to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer for many years. His expertise and passion about this matter are what has made the APPG so successful.

I also thank the other Members who have made excellent speeches about this important issue. I thank the hon. Members for Bosworth (David Tredinnick), the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey), with whom I co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer—he raised the important issue of breast density, which, as he said, is an issue on which we really do need to make progress—the hon. Members for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), the Scottish National party spokesman. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher), for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), and for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), and my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee). She is no longer in the Chamber, but she made a powerful and emotional speech about her daughter, who would be so proud of her bravery today—as, I am sure, her grandchildren will be. I hope that the whole family were watching the debate today. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who, I think, has fought cancer twice.

Grahame Morris: Three times.

Mrs Hodgson: It is an absolute pleasure to see my hon. Friend in his place. Long may he stay there.

Cancer is, understandably, a very emotional topic. One in two people in the UK will be affected by cancer in their lifetimes, and, as we have heard from almost everyone who has spoken today, we have all been affected in some way ourselves. When my children were very small, I lost my mother-in-law to breast cancer. That is one of the reasons why I joined the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer, and I am vice-chair of the group to this day. It is this emotion that encourages us and gets us all to come together to tackle cancer.

Over the years, there has been a steady improvement in cancer survival rates in England. However, we still lag behind the improvements of our European counterparts, and the number of new cancer cases continues to rise year on year. If these trends continue, it is estimated that by 2020 some 2.4 million people in England will have had a cancer diagnosis at some point in their life. That is why the Government must take urgent steps so that cancer diagnosis care and outcomes in England can be improved.

The cancer strategy was a welcome step forward to achieving the best cancer care and outcomes in the world, and Labour is fully committed to delivering, and helping to deliver, that strategy in full. However, as has been mentioned, there are some concerns across the House about the progress of the strategy. I am pleased that some of the targets have already been met, but I am under no illusions—many are no closer to being reached than they were almost three years ago. Will the Minister today commit to publishing a detailed progress update on each of the 97 cancer strategy recommendations by the end of this financial year, so we are all able to celebrate success but also focus our attention on more pressing challenges where needed? There are many challenges that the Government must face before achieving world-class cancer outcomes, but I will touch on only a few today: early diagnosis; waiting times; the workforce; and prevention.

On early diagnosis, we know that if a cancer is diagnosed early, treatment is more likely to be successful, but for cancers such as ovarian cancer and lung cancer it is often too late. The National Cancer Registration and Analysis Service found that over a quarter of women with ovarian cancer are diagnosed through an emergency presentation. Of those women, just 45% survive a year or more, compared with over 80% of women diagnosed following a referral by their GP. I should state at this point that I am chair of the all-party group on ovarian cancer. Similarly, research by the British Lung Foundation found that more than a third of lung cancer cases in England are diagnosed after presenting as an emergency. As a result, the Royal Castle Lung Cancer Foundation found that, if caught early, a person has up to a 73% chance of surviving five years or more. However, the current five-year survival rate for lung cancer is just 10% and, sadly, one in 20 lung cancer sufferers was not diagnosed until they had died. Cancer survival rates have doubled over the last 40 years, but those are shocking statistics. I therefore ask the Minister what his Department will be doing to ensure that cancers are detected even earlier, so that patients are no longer pushed from pillar to post trying to find a diagnosis.

Unfortunately, we know that once a patient has been diagnosed, they then have an agonising wait for treatment. Even if it was a wait of just a week, it would be agonising, but the 62-day target between urgent GP referral and treatment has not been met now for two years,
meaning that patients are having to wait much longer than they should for treatment. Since the target was first breached in January 2014, over 95,000 people have waited for more than two months for treatment to start. Cancer patients should not be expected to wait so long. I therefore ask the Minister what his Department is doing to address this issue.

It is no secret that the NHS and the NHS workforce are under extreme pressure due to underfunding and understaffing by this Government. I want to place on record the fact that Labour Members do not take the NHS workforce for granted. We are incredibly grateful to them for their hard work, support and kindness to patients and their families. They are doing an incredible job despite the circumstances we currently find ourselves in, and we should never stop thanking them for the work they do to diagnose, treat and care for patients. The cancer workforce really are the backbone of the cancer strategy.

The improvement of early diagnosis and waiting times relies on an efficient cancer workforce, so the Minister must make these concerns a top priority if the targets in the cancer strategy are to be fulfilled. A report by Macmillan Cancer Support found that more than half the GPs and nurses surveyed in the UK say that, given current pressures on the NHS workforce, they are not confident that the workforce are able to provide adequate care to cancer patients. That is deeply worrying.

The NHS workforce should be suitably equipped to diagnose, support and care for cancer patients, during and beyond cancer.

Through my work with the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer, I have heard—as I am sure the Minister did during his time as the group’s co-chair—of the overwhelming support that a cancer nurse specialist can bring to breast cancer patients and their families. As we have heard, however, patients with secondary breast cancer are unlikely to have access to a cancer nurse specialist. Research from Breast Cancer Care shows that 42% of hospital trusts and health boards in England, Scotland and Wales do not provide dedicated, specialist nursing care for people with secondary breast cancer, even though they often have complex emotional and supportive care needs. Patients with secondary breast cancer are subject to a postcode lottery when it comes to having a cancer nurse specialist. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that every cancer patient has access to a clinical nurse specialist?

There is no doubt that, if the cancer workforce had the time, resources and support they so desperately need, the recommendations in the cancer strategy would be achieved. I know that that is something the cancer workforce plan, published in December last year, aimed to address. Will the Minister update the House on the progress of the plan and outline how much funding the Government will be granting to ensure that the proposals in the plan soon become a reality? The NHS cancer workforce care for and support their patients every day, and we really need the Government to support the workforce, too.

Finally, I move on to the first issue raised in the cancer strategy: prevention. The World Health Organisation estimates that a third of deaths due to a cancer are the result of the five leading behavioural and dietary risks: high body mass index; low fruit and vegetable intake; lack of physical activity; tobacco; and alcohol. The subject of alcohol was raised by my amazing hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West. Tobacco was identified as the most important risk factor, responsible for approximately 22% of cancer deaths. Taking all five risk factors into account, it is estimated that between 30% and 50% of cancers could be prevented.

The Government’s tobacco control plan—which the Minister thankfully pushed to be published in his first weeks in the job—and the childhood obesity plan are welcome steps towards reducing the high rate of preventable cancers, but they will not go far enough if the Government continue to slash public health budgets. Will the Minister therefore commit to strengthening public health budgets, so that fit and healthy lifestyles can be encouraged across all our communities and help to contribute to cancer prevention? I know that, like me, he is passionate about making sure that England is one of the world leaders when it comes to cancer outcomes, but we are currently lagging behind. However, with the right funding and support from the Government, the cancer strategy has the potential to achieve that. I hope that he will take on board all that we have heard today and go back to his Department with an action plan of how best to move forward, so that we can really achieve world-class cancer outcomes in 2020.
not know the shadow Minister’s motivation for chairing the APPG. I have never said my motivation—I will one day—but I realise now why she was so passionate.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride pretty much summed things up in the first line of the first speech of this debate when she said that we are all “on the same side” when it comes to cancer—what a brilliant way of putting it. The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) talked about her husband, who lives with cancer. Macmillan has been brilliant with some of its communications, and we have all seen the television adverts saying that a mum with cancer is still a mum. There are so many people who are living with and beyond cancer—they call it “survivorship” in America—and we should always remember that.

Let me start by reassuring the House, if I need to, that cancer is a huge priority for me, for the Secretary of State and for this Government. As several Members have said, cancer survival rates have never been higher, and the latest survival figures show an estimated 7,000 more people surviving cancer after successful NHS cancer treatment compared with three years prior. Our aim is to save 30,000 more lives by 2020 through the cancer strategy that we are debating.

However, I know more than anybody that there is still so much more to do and so much potential, which is why we accepted all 96 recommendations in the cancer strategy. We have backed that commitment with over £600 million of additional funding up to 2021. We are now just two years into the implementation of the strategy, and the fantastic NHS cancer doctors and nurses supporting us to achieve our vision have made tremendous progress in many areas. I echo what many Members have said in their support.

The shadow Minister and others asked whether I will report back on how we are doing on all this. In October, NHS England published its “two years on” report on the day that I gave evidence to the all-party parliamentary group on cancer’s inquiry, which led to its report and to this debate. That was our latest progress report, and I hope that we will be doing something again later this year. NHS England’s national cancer director, Cally Palmer, who is based at the Royal Marsden Hospital and is an incredible lady with whom I enjoy working, is leading the implementation of the strategy. She agrees with me that there are many areas where we agree with the APPG’s report. We do not shy away from scrutiny, which is exactly why we are here. However, progress in many areas was not given sufficient prominence in the APPG’s analysis of progress. We said that at the inquiry. It is important that I put that on the record.

The measure of the strategy’s success will of course be about significant improvements in early diagnosis, which I will come on to, and obviously treatment and research. However, I am increasingly aware in this job that we need to make cancer services even better beyond 2020 and that there needs to be a greater focus on a fourth pillar—the “fourth Beatle”, if you like—which is prevention. Of course, we want to be the best in the world at delivering positive outcomes for patients after a diagnosis, but we have to understand the position. Earlier this week, I responded to a Westminster Hall debate attended by Members from Oxfordshire. There has been a 120% increase in the number of people presenting with cancer in Oxfordshire alone in recent years.

The number of people presenting with cancer continues to rise. We can do very well on the first three pillars, and save lives, but prevention is where we will really move the dial. That is why my whole mission as the Member for primary care and public health, a role created by this Health Secretary, has been to put in place a comprehensive system of measures to reduce the risk of cancer, as well as to treat cancer when it occurs.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and the shadow Minister mentioned, one of my first acts as Minister was to launch the tobacco control plan. Why was I so keen to get it out there? Because we promised we would, but also because tobacco is the biggest preventable killer in our country today. The previous Labour Government and this Government have done well with the legislative framework. It is now about supporting local areas to continue bringing down the number of people who smoke from what are already record lows and to ensure that people do not start smoking in the first place.

Last year, we also launched a cross-Government air quality plan, which has been in the news and in the House this week. That plan is important, too, because it will significantly reduce the carcinogens in the air we breathe, which we know has a big impact on the development of disease. Furthermore, in 2016 we published our child obesity strategy, which was just the start of a conversation about how we will reduce child obesity over the next decade. Our overarching focus in all that work is to ensure that our children are supported to live healthy, active and happy lives, so that they grow into healthy, active adults who are less likely to develop cancer. We have always said that the child obesity strategy is constantly under review—it is part one—and we will go further, if needed, to build on that.

As has been mentioned a few times in this debate, perhaps the biggest game changer in preventing cancer is the world-leading work on genomics happening in our country. The chief medical officer’s 2016 annual report, “Generation Genome,” which was published the year before I was appointed, set out the huge potential for genomics in helping us to understand the inherited and acquired genomic causes of cancer and in shaping future research and future personalised cancer treatment, which is so important—it is something we should talk more about, as we should the whole prevention agenda.

Many subjects have been raised today and I am grateful to you, Madame Deputy Speaker, and to Members for giving me time to respond to them. As I suspect she would like me to do, I will give a couple of minutes to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, who opened the debate.

As I have already said, the workforce is key to our strategy. We have already committed to investing in and expanding our diagnostic workforce to improve survival rates by diagnosing cancer earlier. The first ever cancer workforce plan, which Health Education England published in December, set out how we will expand our workforce, how we will continue to invest in the skills of the staff we have, and how we will use their time and expertise where it is most needed.

HEE has already committed to training 746 more cancer consultants and 1,890 more diagnostic and therapeutic radiographers, which we know are in short supply, by 2021. The plan further commits to the expansion of capacity and skills, including 200 additional clinical endoscopists and 300 reporting radiographers by 2021.
Hug, and I say well done to her for an amazing speech. I think that the House, in its own way, gave her a collective Labour Members did, and bless them for doing that. I House wanted to run over to give her a hug—many now and I do not blame her for that. I think the whole hon. Member for Lincoln. I know she is not in her place debate that there is always one speech in these debates—the let me just say, wow. I said to my officials before this hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee). On her speech, do not. Members should know who the cancer alliances are in their areas and should have a relationship with them. It is imperative that the alliances have the operational rigour and readiness to achieve the transformation that we need. After all, our constituents’ money is being allocated. So it is only right and proper, as the Secretary of State made clear in the question and answer session at Britain against Cancer, that the alliances demonstrate their preparedness for this funding. That is not to say that the 62-day standard is a requirement, but it does give a basis on which NHS England and NHS Improvement, along with other senior clinical advisers, can assess an alliance’s readiness to transform services. Transforming services is what we want to do.

Grahame Morris: What happens when cancer alliances do not achieve the 62-day target? It seems completely perverse that individuals suffering from cancer in those areas are penalised by lack of funds from the transformation fund. Is the Minister saying that those cancer alliances can still apply for that funding and measures will be put in place to ensure that they do reach that target?

Steve Brine: Yes, this is not hard and fast. I noted that NHS England has written to me as a constituency MP and to all other MPs today with details of the cancer alliances that they have in their individual areas. I bang on about this every time, as the shadow Minister knows, but I implore Members to engage with their local cancer alliances. I suspect that the people in this debate do that, but I would hazard a guess that many other Members do not. Members should know who the cancer alliances are in their areas and should have a relationship with them.

Let me now discuss CPES, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, as did the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee). On her speech, let me just say, wow. I said to my officials before this debate that there is always one speech in these debates—the shadow Minister was that person a few weeks ago—who leaves not a dry eye in the House, and today it was the hon. Member for Lincoln. I know she is not in her place now and I do not blame her for that. I think the whole House wanted to run over to give her a hug—many Labour Members did, and bless them for doing that. I think that the House, in its own way, gave her a collective hug, and I say well done to her for an amazing speech.

We totally recognise how important CPES is in our continued drive to improve cancer treatment and care, and to monitor that progress. I have always been clear that I want any future survey to continue to deliver the high-quality data that CPES does. I can tell the House that CPES will continue in its current form in 2018-19. We will engage with the cancer community to ensure that any decisions about future delivery and the model to be adopted, should the commissioning arrangements be revised, are informed by all parties and ultimately protect the integrity of the survey and quality of the data. I saw Dame Fiona Caldicott last week in Oxford and discussed the subject with her. Obviously, her work as the patient data guardian led to the challenge we now have—it was necessary work, but it certainly left us with a challenge. Cally Palmer, the national cancer director, and I will meet all the major cancer charities next week at my second roundtable, and this is on the agenda and we will be discussing it with them. I hope Members know that CPES remains very much at the top of my agenda.

Let me touch on early diagnosis, because everybody else has and because it is one of the most important shows in town. In every conversation I have ever had about how we can beat cancer, I have been told, “Early diagnosis”. Historically, our cancer survival rates have lagged behind the best-performing countries in Europe and around the world. The primary reason for that is, without question, late diagnosis. Sir Harpal Kumar will stand down as chief executive officer at Cancer Research UK shortly, but I had the privilege of having lunch with him a few weeks ago, when I asked him what we should think about in terms of the next cancer strategy. He said, “The rock upon which you build your church is early diagnosis.” I will not forget that, which is why one of the key priorities of the strategy is to diagnose cancer earlier, when the disease is more treatable.

How are we doing that? As part of our drive to ensure early diagnosis, we are also introducing the new 28-day faster diagnostic standard from GP referral to diagnosis or the all-clear. I have often said, and I repeat now, that 28 days is not a target; it is a maximum. I well know that when people have a cancer worry, 28 minutes seems like a lifetime, let alone 28 days. However, the 28-day standard is really important. It will be introduced from April 2020. Five pilot sites have started testing the new clinical pathways to ensure that patients find out within 28 days whether they have cancer or the all-clear.

Today, Public Health England, for which I have ministerial responsibility, has launched its 14th “Be Clear on Cancer” campaign, which focuses on breast cancer in women aged over 70, something monitored by my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey)—my excellent successor chair of the all-party group on breast cancer—mentioned. That campaign will run until the end of March. It focuses on age-related risk, encouraging older women to be breast aware, and particularly to be aware of non-lump symptoms, which, understandably, have lower levels of awareness.

The other point I want to make on early diagnosis is that we know that the hardest cancers to detect are those where early symptoms can be vague and often asymptomatic of less serious illnesses. Patients often present to their GP multiple times before that all-important referral. That is why we are piloting 10 multidisciplinary diagnostic centres as part of wave 2 of what we call the ACE—
accelerate, co-ordinate and evaluate—programme. Patients presenting to their GP with vague symptoms can be referred to an ACE centre for multiple tests, one after the other, and receive a diagnosis or the all-clear on the same day. The initial findings are incredibly exciting; I do not get easily excited, but I am excited about this. I had the pleasure of visiting one of the ACE pilots at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford last Tuesday, during recess, and I have to say that the enthusiasm and feedback I got from clinicians and patients about the potential of the ACE centres were really quite incredible. I look forward to seeing the analysis on that work in the coming months.

The shadow Minister talked about emergency room presentations, which are something I was quite shocked by as a Back Bencher when I went to all-party group meetings. It is true that emergency room presentations for cancer are horrible, but that is why the 28-day standard and the ACE centres are so important. When I talk to GPs, they tell me that they will refer and that there will then be a wait. Patients who are, understandably, worried and terrified may then present themselves at an A&E, at which point they may be diagnosed with a primary cancer. That then hits the stats around emergency room presentations for cancer. It does not mean that those people have been carried in; they have often walked in. That all explains why we need to grip early diagnosis better than ever.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) talked about Baroness Jowell’s speech in the other place last month. The Secretary of State was there to listen to the speech, and it was incredibly powerful. Baroness Jowell met the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister this morning. Investment in brain cancer research has been limited by a pretty low volume of research proposals focused on the topic in recent years, and we have been working with charities, academics and the pharmaceutical industry to address that over the last 12 months.

To accelerate our efforts in brain tumour research, the Secretary of State has today announced, alongside Cancer Research UK and Brain Tumour Research, a package to boost research and investment into this most harrowing form of cancer. We have announced £20 million through the National Institute for Health Research over the next five years, with the aim of doubling this amount once new high-quality research proposals become available. CRUK has confirmed it will provide £2.5 million of its money over five years in major research centres and programmes dedicated to brain tumours. Today’s announcement is incredibly positive.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have listened patiently and, unfortunately, I was not here at the beginning. However, my constituent has a very rare form of cancer. He has had to self-fund his treatment in Germany and Southampton, but he has run out of money. The treatment meant he did not die within the weeks he was given and is now living. However, he needs top-up therapy, and his individual funding request has been refused. Without his treatment, he will not live. Could the Minister look into this case?

Steve Brine: Obviously, I will not comment on the case. I was going to suggest that the hon. Lady gets the clinicians to make an IFR, but she can by all means bring the case to me.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire talked about breast density. The UK National Screening Committee commissioned a Warwick University study to investigate the link between breast density and breast cancer. Once complete, if the review suggests that there should be changes to the national breast screening programme, the UK National Screening Committee, which we work with, will consider that under its modification programme. I am in touch with Breast Density Matters, which is a small charity—small but perfectly formed.

The hon. Member for Coventry North East and others talked about blood cancer. We had a very good Westminster Hall debate last month led by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith). As has been said, many patients with blood cancer diagnosis will sadly never be cured; they will be on the regime of watch and wait, often over many years, to see whether the cancer has progressed to a point where treatment needs to begin. That can take a huge psychological toll, which Members have mentioned, on the patient and their families.

By 2020, every patient will receive a holistic needs assessment as part of the recovery package, which is excellent. For the blood cancer patient, their recovery plan will be personalised to take account of the unique characteristics of blood cancer and will include their mental health needs. That is why the Secretary of State announced the additional £1.3 billion last July to expand the mental health workforce. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) made that point very well in his speech—I say this as I am passed a note. I love the notes from the Whips.

David Tredinnick: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: No, I will not, because I want to finish.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway touched on the cancer dashboard, including, yes, rarer cancers. NHS England and Public Health England are currently considering next steps on how we can expand the dashboard. They know that I am frustrated about its being limited to the top four, and I want to see us expand it and do better, and they have had a very clear direction from me on that.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), as always, spoke brilliantly. What a brilliant advertisement for her all-party group and its inquiry. If there is anything that I can do to help—I do not know about the cost of cancer report, but if she sends it to me, I would love to see it—she knows that she only needs to ask.

The hon. Members for Scunthorpe and for Easington talked about pancreatic cancer. NHS services for pancreatic cancer have significantly improved in recent years, with clearer diagnostic pathways, decision making by specialist multi-disciplinary teams and the centralisation of pancreatic surgery with specialised teams. On 7 February, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published the final guidance on the diagnosis and management of pancreatic cancer in adults. This will ensure quicker, I think, and more accurate diagnosis referred to specialist MDTs and better access to psychological support. The hon. Member for Scunthorpe mentioned tumour profiling tests. NICE has made a decision on that. I will get it to write to me with an explanation of that decision, as he has asked, and I will share that with him.
Let me conclude by paying tribute to the staff who do so much, the patient groups and the charities that are working so hard as part of team cancer—we are all on the same team when it comes to cancer—to implement the cancer strategy and to save lives. We are on track to deliver, we think, but we need to make more progress, especially on early diagnosis and looking further forward on the subject of prevention, as I have said. I thank all Members for speaking today. The fight goes on.

4.57 pm

[Steve Brine]

Let me conclude by paying tribute to the staff who do so much, the patient groups and the charities that are working so hard as part of team cancer—we are all on the same team when it comes to cancer—to implement the cancer strategy and to save lives. We are on track to deliver, we think, but we need to make more progress, especially on early diagnosis and looking further forward on the subject of prevention, as I have said. I thank all Members for speaking today. The fight goes on.

4.57 pm

Dr Cameron: Today’s debate has been so profound and amazing, with so many personal contributions. I have been absolutely astounded by the breadth and depth of knowledge across the House and the absolute dedication to the cancer strategy right across these Benches. I am assured that we will work together, taking things forward very positively and making a difference.

It is important that we have discussed the fact that cancer cuts across the lifespan and recognises the serious issues for young people and their experience of cancer. We also looked at not just the physical aspects, but the mental health aspects and the support that is required. We talked about the fact that treatment has to be holistic and evidence-based.

I wish to commend the valuable contributions from charities and our NHS staff. To be honest, their support is invaluable because they are on the frontline. I also wish to mention the very personal contribution of the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee). She made such an amazing speech today. I am sure that, given her experience, she will go on to support and assist so many people, and I am delighted that she is a cancer ambassador. I am sure that many people will benefit from that in the future. Once again, I thank her and everybody here today, and I look forward to working with them on this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the cancer strategy.

City of London Corporation: Pensions

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

4.59 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I would rather not be here this evening speaking in this Adjournment debate, not because I do not care about the issue very much, and particularly about my constituent, Mr Clifford Bell, but because I believe that it is such a simple matter that it should have been resolved years ago. It has not been, and I gave a commitment to my constituent that I would bring it to the House in an Adjournment debate.

I want to begin by setting out the facts of my constituent’s case before moving on to the problems that I have faced in seeking to resolve it and the relevant basic policy concerned. My constituent Mr Clifford Bell worked for the City of London Corporation as a security and services assistant from December 1989 until he suffered an injury on 6 November 2000. He slipped on a metal screw while walking down some marble stairs, fell, hitting his head, and was knocked unconscious. Mr Bell’s health deteriorated while he was on subsequent ill-health leave, as he went on to suffer from loss of hearing in his right ear, incessantly loud tinnitus, dizziness, loss of balance and a series of blackouts that occurred without warning, four of which led to his hospitalisation.

On 10 December 2001, the City of London Corporation made a claim on his behalf to the Department of Work and Pensions to pay him industrial injury benefits, and he was then assessed by a DWP doctor. In February 2002, he was notified that he had been diagnosed with “loss of mental equilibrium and loss of neurological function”, and awarded industrial injury benefits for 12 months before a further examination. He continued to be awarded annual industrial injury benefits until 8 December 2008, when he was adjudged to be qualified to receive industrial injury benefits for life.

On 10 June 2002, Mr Bell met the City of London Corporation about his long-term absence from work and submitted a written application for an early retirement ill-health pension, but he was informed two days later that this was being turned down because the City of London Corporation’s in-house doctor could not say that Mr Bell’s injuries were permanent. He informed them that their two options of either early retirement on a basic pension or alternative work were not acceptable to him, and the City of London Corporation deemed him no longer to be an employee from 24 September 2002.

After months of resistance, Mr Bell was finally provided with a copy of an additional accident report that the City of London Corporation had sent to the Health and Safety Executive 17 months after his accident spelling out that it found “it difficult to believe that he could have slipped on a screw whilst wearing Dr Martens safety shoes” and that “there are a number of staff...who suspect that the incident, if it really happened as Mr Bell describes it, may have been exaggerated.” Not only do vague beliefs and suspicions have no place in an accident report, but I reiterate that he was diagnosed annually by the DWP for eight years before being awarded lifetime industrial injury benefits in 2008.
In June 2004, Mr Bell filed a grievance against the City of London Corporation for its handling of this case, and in 2005 he signed a compromise agreement for the City of London Corporation's insurers, Chubb insurance Ltd, to consider his case under the Local Government (Discretionary Payments) Regulations 1996. The insurers found in his favour and awarded him a termination package of about £50,000, but not an ill-health pension.

That is the timeline so far of Mr Bell's case. So far as he was aware, these were the relevant facts, until in 2012 he discovered the local government pensions committee's circular 252, which noted that the Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations 1997 should have been relevant in his case. Regulation 97(9) states:

"Before making a decision as to whether a member may be entitled under regulation 27 or under regulation 31 on the grounds of ill-health, the Scheme employer must obtain—

must obtain—

“a certificate from an independent registered medical practitioner as to whether in his opinion the member is permanently incapable of discharging efficiently the duties of the relevant local government employment because of ill-health or infirmity of mind or body.”

Regulation 98 sets out that he should have received a written notification of the decision by the IRMP as soon as possible, giving the reasons for the decision and setting out his appeal rights to the Secretary of State under regulation 102.

The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment No. 2) Regulations 2001 further specified, in subparagraph 9A:

“The independent registered medical practitioner must be in a position to certify, and must include in his certification a statement, that—

(a) he has not previously advised, or given an opinion on, or otherwise been involved in the particular case for which the certificate has been requested; and

(b) he is not acting, and has not at any time acted, as the representative of the member, the Scheme employer or any other party in relation to the same case.”

None of those regulations—not one—was followed.

In Mr Bell's research at that time, he discovered two relevant appeals, 869 and S00495, which saw the Secretary of State emphasise the importance of the opinion of the independent registered medical practitioner, including one judgment against the City of London in 2008. By the time Mr Bell discovered that those requirements had not been followed, he was well out of time for consideration by the pensions ombudsman.

Mr Bell first contacted me in September 2014, and I wrote my first of many letters to the City of London Corporation seeking to understand why the rules had not been followed in his case. I wrote to the City of London on 20 October 2014, 26 May 2015, 6 July 2015, 12 October 2015 and 4 November 2015, on each time to the head of the human resources department who had dealt with his case. On each occasion they responded by stating that Mr Bell was not eligible for an ill health pension, making reference to the Local Government Pensions Committee's circular 252 in 2011 and the details of the compromise agreement he had signed in ignorance of his actual rights. Despite my repeatedly asking why the 1997 and 2001 regulations had not been followed in his case, those questions were not answered.

On 27 January 2016, I wrote to the town clerk and chief executive of the City of London, quoting regulation 97(9) of the 1997 regulations and simply asking why those and the similar 2001 regulations should not apply in this case. In his answer of 26 February, the town clerk, John Barradell, stated:

"In May 2002 the Corporation’s Occupational Health Team advised that there was no evidence of permanent incapacity due to ill health so medical retirement is not an option at this point. This view was confirmed on 11th June 2002 when Dr Copeman”—the corporation's internal doctor—"advised that he was unable to state that Mr Bell had any form of medical condition or illness which would result in his permanent inability to work for the Corporation in his current position. This medical opinion meant that it was not possible under the LGPS for Mr Bell to be retired on the grounds of ill health.

It appears that Mr Bell has misunderstood the application of Rule 97(9) referred to in your letter. Rule 97 was not engaged and there was no requirement for an IRMP because Dr Copeman's advice was that Mr Bell did not come within the requirements for ill health retirement.”

I admit that I became very frustrated at that point. The suggestion was that because the internal doctor did not give approval, the independent doctor need not be asked for their opinion, which strikes me as the whole point of the protections set out in those regulations.

In seeking to make sense of that, I wrote to the then Minister for Local Government, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), in July 2016, setting out the case and stating that Mr Barradell's answer was “as clear as mud, since the rule clearly states that independent analysis must be obtained before such a decision is made.”

I asked him to confirm first that the legal position remained as I stated in the letter, secondly whether there would be any exemption to the requirement that independent analysis be obtained before a decision would be taken on an individual's eligibility, and thirdly what course Mr Bell could follow to get what he is entitled to. As expected, the Minister did not—quite rightly—go into detail about my constituent's individual case, but he confirmed that the regulations were in effect at the time and did not indicate any scope for exemptions.

I wrote again to Mr Barradell on 12 December 2016, asking him to review his decision based on the confirmation given by the then Minister. He did not reply to this letter, and so I had to chase him—not literally—and he eventually replied on 30 May 2017, stating that "the City's position as set out in previous correspondence...remains unchanged", and that it did not believe it had had any obligation to inform Mr Bell of his rights at the time. He concluded:

"The City Corporation remains of the view that it has acted properly and fairly in its handling of this case and believes there are no grounds for it to consider this matter further.”

Mr Bell has tried to pursue this down many avenues over the many years since the original injury in 2000, but because he did not discover the details of the 1997 LGPS regulations until 2012, he had by that point already exhausted his appeal options. I had stated to the City of London Corporation on several occasions that if it could not satisfactorily explain why the rules should not apply in this case, I would have to raise this matter in the House. That is why I believe I have no option but to do so now.

There are two alternatives: either the City of London is refusing to apply the rules properly, or the regulations as they exist do not work as they should to provide the assurance of an independent assessment. Industrial injuries
are by their nature unexpected, disturbing and painful events. If they are of the severity to lead to an ill-health retirement, it is quite right that this should follow assessment by an independent doctor as soon as possible and that it should follow a process that sets out the details clearly. Surely such a process cannot and should not be short-circuited by the decision of an organisation—particularly an organisation such as the City of London Corporation—to use an in-house doctor, and not allow the worker to have their injuries certified by an independent practitioner.

I apologise to the Minister and to the House for this very detailed tale, but I wanted to put it on the record. Fundamentally, is the Minister happy with the way in which these regulations operate? Is he aware of other cases where organisations have used the decision of an in-house doctor to override the need, as laid down by the regulations, to get the opinion of an IRMP? If he is aware of such cases, does he intend to tighten the process to prevent this from happening? Is he also concerned about organisations—particularly an organisation such as the City of London Corporation—not giving workers details of their rights in such instances? Is he aware of other complaints about the City of London Corporation in particular not fulfilling its obligations under these regulations? It has not been forthcoming with details to me. Possibly most difficult, can he recommend any further steps that my constituent Mr Bell can follow to have his case finally considered by an independent medical professional? He is even willing to pay for that independent medical professional to get an opportunity to have his case looked at.

For over 17 years, Mr Bell and his family have relentlessly pursued what seems to me to be a grave injustice. In my view, the fact that that grave injustice has been perpetrated by one of the richest local authorities in the country makes it even more disgraceful. I hope that the Minister will be able to provide me with some assurance for me to give my constituent that this will change and that he will get justice.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I congratulate the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) on securing this debate. I had the pleasure of fighting alongside her in the referendum campaign, and I can see that she has for many years applied the same tireless and tenacious campaigning instincts to this case on behalf of her constituent, and I commend her for those efforts. I particularly welcome the chance to respond to the points that she has made and, indeed, I share her regret that we have had to debate this on the Floor of the House.

Pensions are not just about regulations and procedures; they are about security and peace of mind. We all want to retire on a decent income, and as we live longer and healthier lives, we want to be able to save more and make the most of our retirement. Public sector schemes such as the local government pension scheme include insurance-style benefits that help to cushion us against the most unfortunate events. There are protections when staff are made redundant, and provision for their dependants if they die in service, as well as ill-health benefits such as those at issue in this debate.

Throughout the past 100 years, the LGPS developed as a national scheme to become a valuable and integral part of local government, valued by millions. That said, as the recently enshrined Minister responsible for local government pensions, I can attest that it is not a simple scheme. Some of that complexity comes from the need to cover a wide range of possible scenarios. The provisions dealing with injuries at work—such as those suffered by Mr Bell—will interact with statutory schemes of compensation, employers’ sickness procedures and employment law. Injuries can lead to periods of sickness and to permanent or temporary incapacity. Justice comes from treating like cases alike, but also from making fine judgments and distinctions between cases where appropriate.

I want the best possible administration of the scheme. It has been a key aim of the Government to improve transparency and accountability in decision making by such public bodies.

The LGPS is a national scheme set out in regulations, but it is important to note that it is administered locally. That has been a long-standing feature of the scheme, and often one of its strengths. As the hon. Lady will know, local authorities are independent bodies and, first and foremost, they are accountable to their electorates through the ballot box, rather than to central Government. That said, there are routes for independent redress where local authorities fail in their obligations—for example, through the council’s complaints procedure, the local government ombudsman or, when appropriate, the pensions ombudsman. Potentially, and finally, the case can be considered by the courts by judicial review.

It is a feature of any legal system of redress that administrative deadlines and statutes of limitation are associated with each of those, and I am sure the hon. Lady will recognise that all sides in a dispute often benefit from the certainty and closure that those afford. I also believe, however, that if local authorities are to retain the trust of the people they serve, they should always seek to act honourably and correct mistakes, even if they are under no legal obligation to do so. Where I feel a need to call out mistakes, I will do so, from the Dispatch Box if necessary. I hope that my voice in these matters will not be without some moral force.

It gives me comfort that in general the LGPS is well-administered, and the vast majority of complaints received about it are resolved internally. It pays out £9.5 billion in benefits each year, and despite that I am told that there were fewer than 91 complaints to the pensions ombudsman, and of those, fewer than 13% were upheld. Clearly some mistakes will be made, and the impact of those mistakes could be hugely significant for vulnerable people or those of limited means who rely on their pension to sustain their dignity and standard of living in old age.

Let me turn to the details of Mr Bell’s case. The hon. Lady forcefully made her case that the City of London has not complied with its statutory obligations and delivered justice to Mr Bell. As she would expect, my officials have been in touch with the City of London to hear their explanation of events.

It is worth stressing at the outset the obvious difficulty of understanding in precise detail events that happened almost 20 years ago. However, from hearing both sides, it strikes me as common ground that as a consequence of the accident on 6 November 2000, Mr Bell suffered
some degree of incapacity. The question appears to be about the degree of severity and the permanence of that incapacity. I expect it is difficult for any medical expert to give a very definite answer to those questions. It is for that very reason that I would expect this to be settled as a question of fact by someone that both parties can have confidence in. That is the plain meaning and intent of regulation 97.

I can see no good reason why the City of London Corporation chose not to instruct an independent registered medical practitioner who could have either confirmed or corrected the judgment that was reached, no doubt in good faith, by the corporation's occupational health team. Not only was an IRMP not instructed, other consequences followed the failure to consider that a decision of any kind was due in respect of Mr Bell’s application for ill-health retirement. The protections and regulations 98 to 102, whereby a member is informed of his rights of appeal and a reference to the Pensions Advisory Service, appear also not to have kicked in as one might reasonably have expected.

Of course, I cannot say what conclusions the IRMP would have reached, or whether indeed an appeal would have been successful. What I can say is that Mr Bell does seem to have suffered an injustice by being denied an independent assessment of this case. However, I must note that Mr Bell did receive legal advice from a reputable firm of lawyers in settling the terms of his dismissal, for limited efficiency, in 2002. In coming to a decision on how best to pursue his case and whether to accept those terms of settlement, I would hope that the advice he received was complete and accurate.

Let me now address directly the questions the hon. Lady put to me in her closing. First, I am very happy to place on record my concern that the regulations do not seem to have been followed in this case. My clear view is that on the facts available to me at this time an IRMP ought to have been engaged in 2002. If the hon. Lady believes it may serve some purpose, I would be very happy to write formally to the corporation and ask it to justify this omission to me.

On the hon. Lady’s other questions more generally, I personally am not aware and the Department is not aware of any other such cases where this practice was followed, nor of any other specific complaints about the corporation’s administration practices. I would hope that if there were cases similar to Mr Bell’s, they would have found their way, correctly and appropriately, to the pensions ombudsman. There, I believe, the arguments advanced would have received a strong hearing.

The hon. Lady asked if I wish to tighten the rules in this area. Having reviewed it, to my mind the regulations then, as now, are clear about the process to be followed. The regulations then, as now, place the correct emphasis on the need for decisions to be taken in a timely way, based on independent advice and with further avenues for advice or appeal clearly signposted. Having reflected on it, the issue at stake here is not that the regulations themselves were at fault, but whether they were properly adhered to and followed. If they were not, however, then at this point, sadly, I cannot see any specific further steps I can take to pursue this case on behalf of the hon. Lady and Mr Bell.

If we were having this conversation at the time of the incident in question, Mr Bell would have had the avenue of appeal and redress through the council’s own two-stage appeal process. Following that, we could have gone to the pensions ombudsman, the Secretary of State or the courts through judicial review. As I said earlier, however, there are good and necessary reasons why we have time limits and limitations in the determination of rights and liabilities. Statutes of limitation are common across civil and criminal law in this country and across the world. Parties must be allowed to know when a matter has finally been settled. Given where we are now, 18 years after the incident in question, unfortunately the ability to access any of those avenues has obviously expired.

At the time, Mr Bell did receive legal advice and sought a settlement with his employers. I very much hope that his solicitors at the time discussed with him these various avenues that may well still have been available at that time and provided advice to him on the best course of action. It may well be worth Mr Bell or the hon. Lady discussing the matter again with the solicitors to make sure that all the correct procedures and avenues were explored. Owing to the separation of powers between central and local government, I cannot intervene in the day-to-day activities of local authorities, except where specific provision is made by Parliament, and I am not aware of any specific basis on which I could intervene directly in this case.

Kate Hoey: I thank the Minister for giving way—I know he is coming to the end of his speech—and for his thoughtful response. Does he accept that it should have been up to the City of London Corporation, a council hugely rich in personnel, to inform Mr Bell of his rights? It should not have been up to a solicitor a few years later. Surely there was a moral duty if not a legal duty—I think there is a legal duty; I think the regulations give a legal duty—to inform him of his rights and to allow that independent medical practitioner. That was where it all went wrong—something so, so simple. Does he agree that there is a moral case in respect of the City of London Corporation? I should add also that I would welcome his writing to it on my and Mr Bell’s behalf.

Rishi Sunak: Not only is there a moral duty; but—the hon. Lady is right—there is a legal duty both to have used an independent medical practitioner and to have informed Mr Bell of his rights at the time. Mr Bell would, I hope, have been aware of those rights through many of the other communications he would have received as a member of the scheme, but at the point when it became relevant, under articles and provisions 98 to 102, he should have been made aware of them again. It will be of limited comfort to Mr Bell and the hon. Lady, but the pension scheme’s statutory advisory board is currently reviewing the means of resolving disputes locally and looking at simplifying the rules around ill-health retirement. I expect recommendations from the board in due course, and obviously this matter will weigh on my mind as I review those recommendations.

In conclusion, though we have discussed process, I do not want to lose sight of the individual at the centre of this, Mr Bell. The accident that caused him to lose his job seems such a small and random piece of bad luck. That we are still talking about it today shows how unfairness of any kind—of fate or in administration—can be very hard to accept and live with. I do not know whether he is adequately supported today and leading a
[Rishi Sunak]

fulfilling and satisfying life, but I sincerely hope that he is. I commend the hon. Lady again for her tireless work in advocating so forcefully on behalf of her constituent. I know that she will keep pushing the City of London Corporation to examine afresh whether it acted fairly and in good conscience, and I will support her in those efforts. I wish her and Mr Bell every success as she pursues this case.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm

House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con) I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill
Second Reading

9.35 am

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to see the Minister in her place. I was very pleased that yesterday afternoon she put out an official statement of support from the Government. They will be supporting the Bill, not just on Second Reading but through all its stages. That is very welcome and I appreciate that very much.

I am also very pleased with the support—I had no doubts at any stage—of the shadow Minister who will be speaking from the Opposition Front Bench. I must also mention that early on the Prime Minister indicated to me she had a personal interest and lent the Bill her personal support. I would like to say a sincere thank you to the Prime Minister for that. Rounding off this stage of my thanks, I have to mention the Leader of the Opposition. His leadership and support, and that of his office, has been invaluable. I have seldom seen such unanimous support across the House, with the 11 Members who have sponsored the Bill representing seven political parties in this House. Carrying that unanimity and commitment to the country and reaching a consensus there would mean that the Bill can become a very effective Act.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for using this opportunity to bring the Bill to the House. I hope that the House gives its endorsement to the Bill today. I note that the Government have welcomed the Bill. I assure him that if the Government work with him to ensure its speedy passage, they will have the Opposition’s full support.

Mr Robinson: I am grateful for that and thank my hon. Friend very much indeed. His support throughout has been consistent, welcome and a great help. I am pleased to tell the House we also have the support of three previous Prime Ministers. Only Sir John Major felt that he could not support us. He said he did not know enough about it, which was sometimes his problem as Prime Minister.

As I was saying, we should try to carry the unity of the House on this issue to the country and raise public awareness about the need for the opt-out solution we are proposing. That would be a major achievement. The Government have launched a consultation on the matter. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who was with me in the early meetings, urged that course upon the Government. They responded quickly and to great effect: the response has been unprecedented. I am informed, unofficially, that the number of individual responses—separate, individually written letters—is now over 11,000, which is a record for any public consultation of this kind. The consultation does not finish until 6 March. I hope that the campaign will create sufficient awareness for people to find the opportunity to participate in it online via the Government’s website.

The predominantly positive response that we have been led to understand the public consultation is producing is hardly surprising—it is very welcome, but hardly surprising. According to recent reliable polling from the British Heart Foundation, up to 90% of the public said they were in favour of donation in principle, but that only 36% get around to signing the register. I think that many people are guilty, as I was for a number of years, of finding themselves in that position. That in itself suggests how effective an opt-out register could be.

Why are we actively looking towards implementing an opt-out solution at this stage? In England, for example, the situation is disappointing. We have some of the lowest rates of consent for organ donation in western Europe. Low family rates of consent have been one of the major barriers to the donor rate increasing. In effect, that prevents one third of available organs from being used. They go straight to the grave or to the crematorium. None of us likes to think about the worst happening, and it is challenging to have conversations with family and loved ones about one’s wishes after death. However, one of the Bill’s principal aims must be to encourage open discussions among families, so that an individual’s real wishes are known to their nearest and dearest. I think it reasonable to say that in the majority of cases, given the outcome of the consultation and what we know from the polls, people would wish to donate their organs after their death.

However, there will be those who take a different view. Perhaps even one or two in the Chamber feel that way and will make their feelings known in the debate. In no way do I wish them to feel that they have been railroaded into decisions that they do not wish to take. Therefore, I emphasise to those who feel that they cannot lend their support or have doubts about the Bill at this stage that soft opt-out provisions will be built into it. Naturally, I imagine that there will be a fair amount of discussion about those in Committee. I assure hon. Members that, as the Bill’s promoter, I give them my fullest personal commitment to approach discussions about the opt-outs in the spirit of sympathetic open-mindedness.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I am here to support the hon. Gentleman’s Bill, but I ask him to engage with the Jewish community to see whether he can allay their concerns about how it might affect observance with their religious teachings.

Mr Robinson: I am very pleased to have taken that intervention. I remember that one of the former Prime Ministers who supports us—Gordon Brown—wanted
to introduce an opt-out system, but came up against a fairly immovable block in the then Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Sacks, who said then that at no cost could he commit the Jewish community to supporting it. That rather held matters up and the Government were then overtaken by other matters with that Bill, but yes, we will do that. I have been in touch, and we believe that the council itself has made an official statement supporting the Bill.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his Bill, and I know that he has put a lot of hard work into securing it. As any Member who has dealt with a Bill in the House of Commons knows, a lot of effort goes on behind the scenes. He has given important assurances on an opt-out, particularly to communities such as the Jewish community, and it is important to convey that message across. I hope we will get further support on that basis.

Mr Robinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and my honourable colleague from our shared city—we are both immigrants to it, but we hold it very dear to our heart—and his support along those lines is most welcome. I notice that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has come in. I repeat my warm tribute to his leadership on the issue and to the tremendous help that I have received from his office in backing up the Bill. I am deeply grateful. I also took the opportunity to express a sincere thank you to the Prime Minister, who has taken a personal interest and lent her support. I know that he will welcome that, too.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I apologise for having just arrived, Mr Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for what he said. It is wonderful that he has got this Bill introduced, and I hope that today the House can pass it and thus save an awful lot of people’s lives in future.

Mr Robinson: That is indeed our aim. However, I shall sound certain notes of caution about what we need to do to ensure that we get and successfully utilise that increase in organ donation. We have to watch out for certain things, and I will mention those as part of the serious approach that my right hon. Friend would expect from me and that, in due course, he would want to see his Government adopt and perhaps have to implement. I hope that that is the case, too.

We have a proud history of innovation in the field of transplantation. I think that time prevents me from going into any detail on that—indeed, I am getting the message from you, Mr Speaker, that time is of no essence, so let me mention a few things that have been achieved. In our proud history, Britain’s first living donor transplant took place on 30 October 1960 at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. The operation was between identical twins, because at the time, the problems of rejection were still a long way from any sort of reliable solution. In November 1965, the first transplant in the UK from a “non-heart beating” donor was carried out, again at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. In 1968, there were the first successful heart and liver transplants. There is a proud tradition, and I am sure that the whole House will join me in congratulating the NHS and all the staff concerned in this department on their magnificent work.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for introducing this Bill. I think that he will move on to the point that transplant surgery is now becoming routine and people are living normal, long lives as a result. When I was growing up, a heart transplant was the No. 1 item on the news, and now they are being carried out every day.

Mr Robinson: Indeed, and the consequence is that to some extent we are victims of our success. We now have a growing need for organs and a growing waiting list for them, as I will mention. That problem must concern us all, and as a country, we must find a proper resolution.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his campaign. There are 90,000 residents in Doncaster who are on the organ donation register, and I am proud to be one of them. However, 54 patients in Doncaster are waiting for transplants. Unfortunately, Andrew Lake, the brother of my constituent, Amie Knott, died waiting for a double lung transplant. Is it not the case that we need to secure more people who are prepared to be part of this service, so that we can save more lives?

Mr Robinson: The whole House will be touched by the constituency case that my right hon. Friend raises, and it will wholly agree with what she says about the need to increase the availability of organs. We believe in a system that everybody is part of unless they choose to opt out. I have made it clear that the opt-out procedure would be simple and that we would respect those who choose to do so. If we can get the Bill through, it will not make an immediate difference tomorrow, but I am sure that over a period of years, as the activity rates and our capacity to handle donations successfully increase, the availability of organs donated will also increase. That is why I am so keen to get the Bill through Second Reading today.

Since those early successes, some 50,000 people in the UK have been given a second chance and a new lease of life, thanks to organ donation. I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing the gratitude that we all feel to the NHS for that. Even if our history is a proud one, we cannot rest on our laurels. Unaccountably, over the past few years, the steady increase in the rate for donation and transplantation has slowed. In the past four years, to be more precise, it has in effect plateaued in England.

Against that background, there has been growing concern about the fact that a certain amount of inertia is setting in. The most recent figures for the whole United Kingdom make disquieting reading. As of March 2017, 6,388 patients were registered on the active waiting list for a transplant; in the same year, 457 died while on the active waiting list. Perhaps more significantly, over the same period, 857 people died after being removed from the active waiting list because while on it they had become too ill to receive a transplant. That shows how severe the situation is.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the Bill, which I support. Many of my constituents have contacted me about children who have died for want of a suitable organ donor. I wonder whether my hon. Friend will explain at some point how the Bill will benefit children who need an organ donor.
Mr Robinson: I think that that is one of the most moving aspects. We held a reception last night. Many of those present had benefited from organ donations, but in a number of cases it was their children who had benefited. I will indeed say more about that shortly.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I am, of course, here to support him. The sad reality is, however, that behind every organ donation is someone who has died. It is right and proper for there to be facilities for children to receive donated organs, but that means a very sensitive time for the donor’s parents, who have lost a child of their own. How might it be possible to deal sensitively with those families whose children have died?

Mr Robinson: We would encourage that across the board. Although my hon. Friend draws attention to a vital area, it is only one of those that we hope to address. As I am sure he will understand, different issues seem equally important to those who are in other categories. I do not claim that my Bill on its own is a vital prerequisite to the imparting of a new impetus to the increase in organ donations that we know the country urgently needs.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the Bill, which I support. May I pursue the point made by the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd)? I believe that in 2016-17, after Wales had introduced presumed consent, 13 out of 33 families withdrew that consent when they were asked about it. Can the hon. Gentleman assure me that the Bill will allow room for relatives still to be consulted and to withdraw the consent? After all, it is being asked for at a very sensitive time. I want us to ensure that families are given that latitude, while trying to do everything possible to increase organ donation.

Mr Robinson: The right hon. Lady raises a difficult but important issue. As part of the soft opt-out, there will certainly be arrangements for families and close friends to express their opinions. It is interesting to note that in Spain, which has no register and operates what is effectively an opt-out system, there is always consultation with every family who can be reached in time in the absence of a register, and as a result of those consultations there is a tremendous degree of consent. It can, of course, work the other way as well, and the Bill will make full provision for that. It needs to be carefully worded, and I invite those with a particular interest to look at it, but the intention is to give families in that position an effective veto. I may not have fully picked up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd).

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the Bill, which I support. Does he agree that the point about Spain highlights the fact that the Bill is not actually the answer, but only part of the solution? After its Bill was passed, Spain took 10 years to increase the rate of donation by investing heavily in transport and infrastructure and a national organ donation system.

Mr Robinson: Yes. I shall refer to some of the circumferential investment that will be necessary to ensure that our own system is successful. Of course we would be starting from a much higher level, because our infrastructure—the nursing provision that is so vital, the body of professional surgeons and the specialist units—is much greater than it was in Spain. However, we recognise the success of the Spanish system. At its heart is the ability to reach the families and talk to them. That should happen in any event, but we believe that when it happens against the backdrop of an opt-out system, it starts from a different position and is—we hope—likely to produce a more positive result.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I think it fair to say that most, if not all, Members who are present today are here because we support the Bill and want to see it on the statute book. But—and it is a “but”—the hon. Gentleman said in his response to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) that friends and family would be consulted. I think it important for the Bill to be very precise if the matter is not to be brought into dispute and if a wave of withdrawals is not to be generated, which is the last thing that we want. Will the hon. Gentleman ensure that that issue is very clearly addressed when the Bill goes into Committee, as we hope that it will?

Mr Robinson: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s thoughtful and apposite intervention, and I can give him that assurance. Obviously, as the Bill’s promoter, I shall take a personal interest in ensuring that the right balance is struck. We should bear in mind that the balance will be struck in a context in which opting out is the law of the land, which I think changes the starting point of the discussions with families, but those discussions should nevertheless be handled with proper caution and respect in view of the moments of agony and the awful decision making with which families are faced.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I am here to support the Bill, but, as a Wales Member, I want to provide some reassurance. Wales already has legislation that has been working and that deals specifically with that point, and we have a higher donation rate than any other nation in the UK. I welcome the Bill, and I hope that everyone present will support it today.

Mr Robinson: I am very grateful for that intervention, in every sense. I was going to come on to the situation in Wales, which has been unfairly and prematurely judged to be a failure—even by as eminent an authority as the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, which yesterday opined on the basis of figures produced only one year into the scheme. However, the latest serious peer-reviewed article in The BMJ expresses a different opinion, some three or four years into the scheme. It was written in February this year, so it is up to date, and there have been a few years in which to observe the trends. According to the author, a respected journalist, Wales has more registered donors and has experienced fewer family refusals and more living donations than any other part of the UK since the introduction of an opt-out system. The article concludes that “none of the concerns about deemed consent” —concerns rightly expressed by Members this morning— “have materialised".
The signs from Wales are very good, but these are early days, and I think it behoves us to note the caution expressed by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics. We want to proceed carefully and with all the necessary infrastructure in place. One of the great aspects of our present system is that it is trusted by the public, and we cannot and will not put that trust at risk. We must ensure that the new system is introduced properly. What I have seen at first hand of NHS Blood and Transplant suggests that it is a very well organised outfit.

We do have a functioning register; we do know what we are doing; and we are building up our essential counselling nursing capability. As we build it up, some limited investments will also be needed in facilities, for any growth in demand will lead to a growth in the requirement for facilities. I say to the Minister, who is looking rather grim at the moment—[Interruption.] That’s better. I say to her that the NHS is very much in favour of this; I will quote a figure in a moment. Its thoughts as to the extent to which we can benefit in terms of increased numbers of organs and saved lives are encouraging, but it adds that its requirements for additional resources must be met. All I can say to hon. Members in that respect is that the amount of money required—the small requirement of resources in terms of software, mainly for the training of the nurses, and hardware and some facilities—is minuscule in relation to the good it can do. I think of the shear joy we can see in those, particularly the children, who have had the benefit of a transplant.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The hon. Gentleman glossed over Wales in his remarks, but Welsh Assembly Government research showed that the introduction of the opt-out has had no impact on the number of organ donors in Wales, while the organisation CARE has said it has led to a reduction, not an increase, in the number of donors. What learning has the hon. Gentleman taken from the experience in Wales, and what measures are there in his Bill to address some of the flaws there might have been in that system in Wales?

Mr Robinson: That is a very moderate intervention from the hon. Gentleman, for which I am grateful. He is probably looking at the recent remarks and quotes from the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, which relate back a year, if I am not mistaken, to 2016 or ’17, but we are now in 2018 and the situation has evolved. I recommend to him an article I have here in The BMJ; I will leave it out for him if he would like to read it. It gives a full account of the situation in Wales, and is very hopeful. But, as I have said, we are going to monitor this carefully, and we should be cautious, practical and realistic in our approach to the introduction of the system in the UK.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: May I give the hon. Gentleman some good news on Wales? The legislation in Wales was pioneering, and was much discussed when I was Secretary of State for Wales. I have been looking at the details of some of the statistics from Wales in the latest report on organ donation and transplantation activity data, and the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to note that back in 2013-14 some 1,005,213 people were opted into the organ donation register in Wales, while for the first three quarters of the years 2017-18 that number increased to 1,220,331. The fact that more people are opted into that register is very positive news from Wales.

Mr Robinson: It was because the figure was so low in 2013 that the Welsh Government decided to move to an opt-out system. I agree with the right hon. Lady, and disagree with those who, for some reason or another, will not look at the most recent facts and move with the situation that is developing. The situation in 2013 was bad, which the Welsh Government recognised and they then went for an opt-out system. Then there was a period of bedding-in and there appeared to be no change, but the most recent figures for 2018—as opposed to 2017 or ’16—are showing a marked improvement, and I am sure we can all rejoice at that. This is not a matter of trading economic figures across the Chamber; that is a sheer fact and one that I think we can all take great satisfaction from.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): My interest in this matter arose from a constituent—a young man—who came here and lobbied. A year later I attended his funeral because, sadly, he did not get the transplant he wanted, but he had suffered enormously in the preceding period. We have now had the opt-out in Wales, however, and, regardless of what people can do with the statistics, the fact is that people in Wales are still alive who would have died before the law was passed, and people are dying unnecessarily in England.

Mr Robinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It was his Bill that sparked my personal interest, and I pay great tribute to the work he did in preparing that Bill, which we have adopted almost in its entirety. He will be pleased to know that we are hopeful that his Bill—from the beginning, as it were—will now find its way alongside my own on to the statute book; I know that will give him great pleasure. What he says about that individual case is certainly true. The positive news from a cautious assessment from the NHS is that, provided the opt-out system—the quintessential starting point for all these forward projections—is introduced and backed up with the necessary limited revenue and capital spending, up to 300 lives a year could be saved by deemed consent.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I am delighted to appear as one of the supporters of the hon. Gentleman’s Bill, and am very pleased to have my name on it. I hope he will be able to look at just one thing in Committee: the issue of deemed consent involving people who lose capacity towards the end of their lives. I hope there will be more clarity in Committee to enable people who have made the decision that they want to make their organs available to do so, when just their brain is no longer of much use to anybody else and they do not have the capacity. I hope the Bill will be clear about such circumstances when people lose capacity towards the end of their lives but when the rest of the body can still be of use to others.

Mr Robinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and the fact that he agreed to be a supporter of the Bill—his name appears on the face of the Bill, he will be pleased to note. He raises an area of great concern, but it is something we will have to deal with in Committee: I am sure he will agree that it is not for Second Reading, so I will not go further into it now.
Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this Bill to the House, and I will of course support it. He mentions the modest investment in capital and resources needed to give effect to this when it has become law, but does he agree that by saving lives and making people healthy enough to play a full part in society, we will be increasing the ability of our country to succeed, and also — although this is obviously a secondary issue by comparison with the saving of life — we will be reducing the ridiculous amount of spend on just keeping people alive when they actually need organ donations?

Mr Robinson: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend and thank him for his intervention, but I would rather not go down the route of cost-benefit analysis; these are matters of life and death and are best left as such when we look at what we can do to save lives that we know can be saved.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I strongly support my hon. Friend’s Bill. Alongside this measure and a number of the other things he describes, does he agree that the most important thing we can do is have that conversation with our families and loved ones, to make it absolutely clear to them that when we are gone we wish whatever bits of us are still of any use to be given to others so they might continue to live? Is that not what we really need to do to make sure that, when that difficult conversation comes to be had over a loved one who has died on a hospital bed, as many people as possible know and the family can say, “Of course”?

Mr Robinson: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. I do not know whether he was in the Chamber when I remarked on the importance of family conversations, which are absolutely vital, and also the importance of public awareness. The Government consultation has contributed enormously to public awareness. We must ourselves now set the example in terms of being registered and not opt out — I certainly have no intention of even considering that.

The other great contribution that we can make in personal terms is to hold those conversations with our own families and encourage others to do so. Public awareness will not necessarily lead to that happening, yet we know that it is at that moment when families are confronted with the awful situation that they often back off, sometimes even overriding the wishes of the deceased who happens to be a registered donor. We can do no more important work than to hold those difficult family conversations and encourage others to do so.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a good point about making people aware of the difference this can make. Yesterday, I found out about the British transplant games, which involve live donors and people who have received an organ transplant. This wonderful event will take place in Birmingham on 2 August. I met a woman called Pat who had been a live donor, and she said that she was going to take part in the games with the person to whom she had donated an organ. I thought that was so wonderful. Obviously, no one wants to think about the worst thing happening to their family or anyone they love, but it would be wonderful to think that anything I could give when I have gone would help someone to live a fulfilling life that could even involve taking part in a sporting event like that. We should think about the future and the real difference that this can make for so many people. I am so proud to be standing here with my hon. Friend on this day and supporting his Bill.

Mr Robinson: I feel inclined to say that I rest my case, but I cannot quite do that just yet. I think I am okay for time, despite all the interventions. I will, however, proceed to a conclusion now, if I may.

I have quoted some disquieting statistics, including the 500 saveable lives — or avoidable deaths because of the unavailability of an organ — a year. To put it another way, if we continue with unchanged policies, some 500 of the 6,500 people on the present waiting list will, in effect, be on a life sentence and will die in the next year if no organ becomes available. I believe that the House will agree that this is simply not good enough. We can do better as a nation. We have shown that we can do that through the creation of the NHS, which is something that no other nation achieved. Here again, we can be pioneers in making transplantation more successful, principally through an increase in organ donation.

As I have said, I do not think that my Bill is the answer to all the questions — we have discussed many of the points that need addressing in the course of this debate — but my God, I am convinced that it is a necessary start if we are to regain the momentum and the impetus that we lost by moving to an opt-out system. After all, that is why this measure has been introduced in Wales, and that is why I am putting my proposal to the House today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) talked about the British transplant games. Last night’s reception, given by the Daily Mirror — very fortunately — in the Terrace Room, was very moving. I met Max’s mom, as she has come to be known — Mrs Emma Johnson — and she gave us the most up-to-date news on Max, who has become something of the face of the campaign. I make no excuse for being emotional about this, and I am sure that everyone will be delighted to know that Max is still doing well. He went back to school part time last September, and it is hoped that next year he will be back full time. The hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) represents the donor family — the Ball family, whose daughter, Keira, was killed in a terrible car crash; a most unfortunate incident — and he brought to my attention something about the Max story that I did not know. Keira gave her heart to give that young boy his life, and Max’s mom, Mrs Johnson, has said how much she is looking forward to meeting the family. She says she wonders how they will feel when they put their hand on Max’s heart and feel their daughter’s heart still beating. I had a call alerting me to the fact that the hon. Gentleman wanted to take part in the debate and to refer to this, and I said that that would be great. I am sure that he will catch your eye in due course, Mr Speaker.

There are many in this House who have been affected in one way or another. If I may, I would like to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), who was also at the reception last night. Her daughter, who unfortunately could not attend, has been on daily dialysis for 12 months now while waiting for a kidney. I know that my hon. Friend will also want to catch your eye if possible, Mr Speaker.
I hope that the party opposite will take it in the best spirit when I say that I would like to thank the Daily Mirror for its magnificent campaign on this issue. It shows just what a free press, fighting courageously, can achieve for a brave cause. It is, in that sense, the best of the best. I said that to their representatives very openly last night in thanking them for the campaign, and I know that they feel that they have achieved something—perhaps more than some newspapers achieve in 24 pages of exposure. The representative of the Daily Mirror told me that my thanks were welcome, but they were nothing compared with the happiness felt at the Mirror every time there was a successful transplant as a result of the campaign, especially among the young.

I have had many letters on this subject, although it is properly not appropriate for me to read from them now, as I was intending to. I shall just say that the House has an opportunity today that, while not unique, might not occur again for several years. We have the opportunity to introduce a Bill whose enactment we could achieve by the end of this year, if it receives its Second Reading today, and whose effect could begin to be felt in the following year. I believe that the House is in the mood to rise to the occasion, and I am sure that we will seize this opportunity to pass a Bill that will come to be regarded as an Act for life.

10.17 am

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Thank you very much for calling me to speak so early in the debate, Mr Speaker. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) on the compassionate way in which he introduced his Bill, and on bringing it before the House. I hope that I am not assuming too much when I say that I think there is good support for it on both sides of the House. More importantly, I believe that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who will be speaking from the Front Bench today, will also be giving it her support. For me, this is a bit like déjà vu, because I went through all these arguments back in 2010 when the Welsh Assembly was looking at introducing what finally became the Human Transplantation (Wales) Act 2013, which took effect in 2015.

The permitting of a system involving deemed consent is quite a complex concept. To be truthful, it received many objections from a large number of people in Wales at the time, on a large number of grounds. I was approached by the Kidney Wales Federation, which did a fantastic job, along with a lot of other organisations, in lobbying politicians and explaining the position of families who were waiting for organs and families who had been approached to donate the organs of a deceased relative. The debate got quite heated at times, and it also gave rise to a lot of myths. Looking at the evidence, I have always found that the medical profession and others surrounding bereaved relatives, or those who are about to become bereaved, have handled these matters with great sensitivity and achieved good outcomes. Indeed, the legislation in Wales still permits families to withdraw the so-called deemed consent, which means that their views can be taken into consideration. That is extremely important.

One thing I looked at was the success rate of the 2008 organ donation taskforce, which helped to increase donation rates greatly in the five years of its operation. There was a 50% increase in donors and a 30.5% increase in transplants, which are impressive statistics. At the time, I was exceedingly worried that, by introducing controversial legislation, we might do damage to a campaign that was yielding positive results—that needs to be taken into consideration.

The truth is that there are more people on the donation list than there are organs available. For many people in this Chamber, and beyond, it is worth noting that there was a particular problem in the black and minority ethnic population because, in those days, 23% of the people waiting for organ donation were from the BME population and only 1.2% of the people on the register were from the BME community. That huge discrepancy and disparity caused a lot of aggravation.

I was unsure about the legislation in Wales, but I am pleased to stand here as a politician and openly admit that I have changed my mind. There is no disgrace in that—when the facts change, I change my mind, which is important. One reason why I changed my mind is that I have a dear friend who, for the purpose of this debate, I will call Jane. I have known her son since he was born, and I will call him John.

John has primary sclerosing cholangitis, a chronic liver disease whereby the bile ducts, the passages that carry bile from the liver to the intestines, become blocked and narrowed by inflammation, so scar tissue builds up and the liver itself stops functioning. The symptoms can include tiredness, aching, itching, pain in the abdomen, jaundice, chills and fevers. The progression of the disease, although highly variable, usually leads to one conclusion—that the patient needs a liver transplant.

John has been told that, because of the shortage of transplants, he has to be in cirrhosis before he can be put on the list, and then he will have to wait for a match. By that time, he may not be well enough to have a transplant. I am close to the family and have seen the effect on them. Jane wrote to me:

“This has obviously affected the whole family. John still lives with us at 25, and we are, in fact, his carers in some respects, as we know he will only get worse in time. We do not know how much time he has, and he cannot plan for his future. As well as physically, mentally it takes a great toll on him, as he does not know if he will get a transplant when he needs one. Organ donation would help a great deal in this.”

When you have a friend with a boy—he is now a man, and he is a highly intelligent and wonderful human being—in that position, you have to reconsider where you stand on such legislation.

The Bill will not be enough in itself, but it will do absolutely no harm and it will again stimulate a debate. If the Bill continues to be accompanied by campaigns to encourage people to register and to donate, it will help to raise awareness, which will help to increase the statistics, as we did in the first five years following the organ donation taskforce.

We are all living longer, and if we in this House can prolong the life, and improve the quality of life, of people such as John who suffer from rare diseases, we should do so. I will give this Bill a fair wind. Obviously the devil will be in the detail, and we will need to consider the Bill carefully. I would like to have a consultation, and to learn from the experience in Wales, because there will be a lot to learn—Wales has forged the way.
I do not want a hard system, as in Austria—that is not what I envisage. I want this whole area still to be surrounded by the care and consideration of the medical profession, and I want the latitude that allows families and people with genuine reasons not to participate, but I want to see increased numbers of people on the register. I want to see increased organ donation and more lives saved. I give the Bill a fair wind.

10.25 am

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) on his success in the private Members’ Bills ballot, which is no mean achievement, and on choosing this most important topic. I have always supported an opt-out system, as opposed to an opt-in system. What I will talk about today has not resulted in my decision that an opt-out system is right, but it has amplified the importance of my decision.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who has done so much good campaigning on this issue. I also pay tribute to the Daily Mirror, which has already been mentioned, for its campaign, and to the Prime Minister and the Government for their statement this week in support of the campaign—that is very important.

Today I will talk about my family’s story. I rarely talk about my family in public, because it is me, not them, who entered public life. There is nothing special or unusual about my family, and what has happened to us over the past 18 months could happen to anyone. Young or old, rich or poor, there is no differentiation when such things happen, and they highlight the reality of the need to change the law to deemed consent.

I have four grown-up children, all now either married or with long-term partners, and five wonderful grandchildren. We are a very close family, and I am lucky that we all live within two miles of each other in Sunderland—when I am not down here. My eldest daughter, Rebecca, is now 36. She is married and has a six-year-old daughter, and she was referred to the renal unit of the Freeman Hospital in Newcastle after routine blood tests showed a problem with her kidney function. That was in October 2016, so not that long ago.

After Rebecca spent a week or so in hospital, it became clear that she was quite ill with significantly reduced kidney function that could at some point lead to her needing a transplant. That was where we thought we were, which was a big enough shock in itself, but the medical team at the Freeman thought that they could stabilise her condition.

Rebecca had been reasonably okay until that point. She had had a few issues health-wise, but she was okay, so the diagnosis of chronic kidney disease came as a huge shock to her, to me and to our family and friends. To face the reality of the fragility of life is very hard at any time, but facing it for one of my children, although she is an adult, is one of the hardest things I have ever had to do.

My daughter had until recently been a healthy, happy young woman. She was quite a serious runner in her spare time, and she regularly ran half-marathons and occasionally, marathons. In fact, in the weeks before she took ill in October 2016, she had gained a place at the 2017 London marathon—she did not run it, obviously. It is impossible to describe the shock of someone like that suddenly becoming so ill. I have to say that she did not get her fitness drive from her mother, who goes to watch her run but does not run herself.

Sadly, Rebecca’s condition deteriorated very quickly, and in June 2017 she had surgery to enable her to start dialysis. One of the few positive parts of the general election campaign for me was that I was at home for six weeks, so during the time when her health was deteriorating rapidly I was able to drop everything and get to the hospital quickly. It is a lot harder to do that when I am 300 miles away.

Rebecca started dialysis last July, and I want to talk a little about the daily reality of her life. In the two or three months leading up to her having surgery she became increasingly unwell, to a point where, daily during those last few weeks, she was just lying on the sofa after she got up and she was not eating particularly well, if at all. She had the odd slice of toast or bowl of cereal. One thing that happens when people have kidney failure is that they feel very sick and generally unwell, with no energy. She could not really walk to the end of the street and she certainly could not take part in all the things that her daughter did on a day-to-day basis.

When dialysis was first mentioned to us, it was a terrifying prospect, but its arrival has given Rebecca a quality of life again. She does PD—peritoneal dialysis. She has a machine at home and links on to it every night, and for four hours her body dialyses on it. That means that she has got some quality of life back. She is back at work, but she does have restrictions. She has to have a restricted diet, which for her means no coffee, chocolate or cheese—three things she loves. She gets two of those from her mother, but I am a tea drinker, not a coffee drinker. She is here and she is alive. Whenever she has a bad day—she does have bad days emotionally, because this is a difficult thing to be dealing with—and she says, “I am sick of this dialysis”. I say, “Just think: what’s the alternative, Rebecca?” That quickly focuses the mind and she picks herself up.

As a family, and with close friends, we have all rallied round to support Rebecca and each other through this challenging time.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): My heart goes out to the hon. Lady for what she has been going through, and I am sure everyone in the House today would say the same. She mentioned dialysis, and I am going to mention a constituent of mine, a very young girl. This Facebook post hits home:

Today 1,608 days with total kidney failure. Today 19,296 Hours spent on Dialysis. Today waiting for the precious call, a match has been found."

Does the hon. Lady agree that when we think of such children, and people like her daughter, it is very hard not to support the Bill today?

Julie Elliott: Absolutely. As I have said, this sort of illness strikes indiscriminately, and when we attend appointments—I attend just about every appointment with Rebecca—we see everyone from very young people through to older people; we see people from all walks of life. It is heartbreaking seeing people with this sort of illness. Every one of those people has a family, has a story and has loved ones, and it is very difficult.
I want to talk a little about the impact of this kind of illness on the wider family. As Rebecca’s health rapidly deteriorated, she had to be off work sick quite a lot. She has had some considerable time off sick. Even though she is now back at work, she still gets days when, as happened this week, she is not very well in the middle of the day and has to come home. Dialysis does not mean that someone is fit, well, healthy and leading an absolutely normal life. She has been very lucky, as her employers, True Solicitors of Newcastle, have been an amazing support to her. They have done everything they can to help her. They have done fundraisers for kidney charities—I am thinking particularly of her colleagues Kay and Lindsey. If I am trying to get to the hospital from wherever I am when Rebecca suddenly takes ill, they will take her to hospital from work and sit with her until one of the family can get there. I want to thank them publicly, because many people in this situation are not so lucky and face losing their jobs, with all the hardships and problems that creates. So it is important to say thank you to people who have been fantastic.

Next I want to mention the renal unit at the Freeman Hospital in Newcastle. Not only is that a world-class unit, but it has some of the most amazing and dedicated staff I have ever come across. From the time someone walks through the door at the out-patients unit, the receptionist, Ann, is always smiling, always welcoming and always looking after them, and the same is true of everyone right through to the most senior doctors. We have seen a lot of different doctors as this illness has progressed. The whole team are amazing, particularly the PD nurses who are looking after Rebecca’s dialysis. They look after Rebecca, but they also look after her family and they have got to know us all, because we have all been there with her at different stages. They are the essence of everything that is great about our health service. They are working under enormous pressures on their time and resources, but they always have time for us. I want to say a personal thank you to them.

I know that this is not a political debate as such, but I am a politician, so I hope Members will give me a moment’s licence. I am going to say that I think the essence of everything that is great about our health service. They are working under enormous pressures on their time and resources, but they always have time for us. I want to say a personal thank you to them.

The impact on our family has been huge. You go through a period of shock, disbelief and anger as to, “Why Rebecca?” More than one doctor has said to us through that period that it should not be happening to her. It is important to thank colleagues in this place, from all parts of the House, who have given me a huge amount of support. The Whips have been fantastic; they have basically said, “Just go. Text us and tell us you’ve gone.” There is a slight personal thing in that as well, because our Deputy Chief Whip, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), has known Rebecca since she was a child. As many Members will know, I was his agent in 1997 when he got elected to this place, and Rebecca, being my daughter, ran one of the committee rooms. The support has been really lovely. A lot of the time in this place the differences that we have are highlighted, but at the end of the day we are all people trying to do the best for our constituents and we all care about people.

For me, as a mother, my natural instinct has always been to make things better for my children—that is what we all do. Rebecca is always going to be the baby I gave birth to 36 years ago; you love that child instantly and unconditionally, and that never changes. It is terrible to be in a situation where I cannot fix something that has gone terribly wrong. But what I can do, from the privileged position I have of being a Member of this place, is raise awareness and campaign for a change in the law, to that of deemed consent. The change in the law needs to come, and I want to touch on the investment that needs to happen on the back of that change—that has been alluded to in a number of contributions today.

This issue needs to be discussed in schools and among families, so that transplantation becomes a normal part of the conversation of life. We also need investment in the health service to support what I believe will be an increase in the number of available donor organs.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I wish the hon. Lady and Rebecca all the very best for the future. The Bill is really important, which is why I am here to support it, but will she also acknowledge, as I am sure she will, those live donors who give an organ? My friend Jane has recently given a kidney to her nephew-in-law. That is an incredible thing to have done—for many of us, it is difficult to imagine it—and it has turned around the life of her nephew-in-law, in the same way that, I hope, Rebecca’s life will be turned around eventually. Although the Bill does not cover such people, they also deserve the House’s praise. Hopefully, another good thing that will come out of this debate is raised awareness of that possibility.

Julie Elliott: Absolutely. Five members of my family, including me, put ourselves forward to be donors, but none of us matched. Matching is really difficult. One family member is now entering a pool situation, which is a bit like a swap shop of organs, in case somebody has an organ that fits Rebecca and my family member’s fits round and all supported each other, and we remain very positive. Rebecca is very lucky that she has a brother and sisters, my sister, her husband and a great mother-in-law, who have all played their role in supporting this journey we are on, and continue to do so.

It is very difficult being on call for a phone call. My phone is with me all the time. It is very difficult working 300 miles away when you are in this situation. As we all know, we sometimes travel out of this country in this job, so whenever I travel out of the country on business with Parliament, I have a plan of how I am going to get back. It is important to thank colleagues in this place, from all parts of the House, who have given me a huge amount of support. The Whips have been fantastic; they have basically said, “Just go. Text us and tell us you’ve gone.” There is a slight personal thing in that as well, because our Deputy Chief Whip, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), has known Rebecca since she was a child. As many Members will know, I was his agent in 1997 when he got elected to this place, and Rebecca, being my daughter, ran one of the committee rooms. The support has been really lovely. A lot of the time in this place the differences that we have are highlighted, but at the end of the day we are all people trying to do the best for our constituents and we all care about people.

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I know that this is not a political debate as such, but I am a politician, so I hope Members will give me a moment’s licence. I am going to say that I think the health service staff need a pay rise and the NHS needs the moment’s licence. I am going to say that I think the health service staff need a pay rise and the NHS needs the
something else. That is a marvellous thing to do and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to draw attention to it.

As has been mentioned, presumed consent does mean that people have the right to opt out of giving their organs, and some people will. It is very important for that to be in the legislation. I absolutely respect people’s decision to opt out, because it is not the right thing for everybody. That is as important as changing the law.

My final words are for the families of donors: your selflessness in donating your loved ones’ organs at a time of such personal grief, to save the lives of people you do not know, is such a wonderful thing. Everybody should be grateful for that and thank those people. The grief of having lost a loved one carries on forever, but I am sure that there is some comfort in the fact that their family has helped and their loved one’s organs have gone to help someone else. It is important to say thank you. As a family member of, hopefully one day, a recipient, I want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart. They are very special people.

Let us send the Bill to Committee and change the law to save more lives, for the thousands who are waiting for transplants. Today, we see Parliament at its best, overcoming political differences for something that just needs to change. It is a day we should be proud of.

10.42 am

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott). We have all learned that her daughter Rebecca is just as strong and brave as her mother. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) on bringing the Bill to the House and thank him for the compassionate and positive tone he has taken and for the collaborative way he is working across party lines to make sure that we drive this legislation forward.

The Bill is vital; we are talking about a genuinely life-or-death issue. It is a true tragedy that 456 adults and 14 children lost their lives last year while on the organ donation list. Every single day, somebody dies because they do not get the transplant that they desperately need. There are around 6,500 people waiting for organs who do not want to become a part of those statistics. This legislation is for them, and it is about saving lives. Organ donation does save lives: around 50,000 people in the UK are alive today because they have had an organ transplant. Some 80% of the population support organ transplants in principle and 25 million people are on the NHS organ donors list—including, I am proud to say, me. That number has risen by 75% over the past 10 years, and transplants are up 56%.

The Bill, as I am sure its author will agree, is about removing obstacles to donating while at the same time allowing anyone who does not wish to donate to opt out. As many colleagues have said, it is important that we do not attach any stigma to anybody who chooses to opt out for a variety of perfectly valid reasons.

Philip Davies: The hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) has identified a real issue that he supports, and I certainly have no intention of blocking his Bill. Nevertheless, does my hon. Friend share some people’s misgivings about the principle of the state presuming that people have consented to something when they have not, and the potential implications for public policy? Does he have any understanding of those misgivings about the state presuming that people have done something that they have not actually done?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly valid point that I am sure will be raised again in this debate, but we are talking about a matter of life and death. All the surveys show the large number of people willing to support organ donation in principle, so it is alarming that the number who are actually on the organ donation list is relatively low, despite the fact that it takes literally two minutes. In an ideal world, everybody would be completely educated and would voluntarily make their own choice, but that is not happening. Many such issues will be raised in Committee; I hope we will be able to find a reasonable alternative.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that in the past 10 years the number of organ donors has increased by 75% and the number of transplants by 56%? Is there really a need for the Bill?

Nigel Huddleston: There is indeed, because there is still a long way to go and people are still dying because they are not getting the donations or transplants that they need. There absolutely is a need to move forward with the Bill.

Let us look at the alternative systems around the world. The example of Spain is often mentioned. We are looking at the system there as some kind of model, although perhaps not an exact one. Spain leads the world with 43.4 deceased donors per million. It is joined at the top of the statistical league table by other opt-out systems in countries such as Croatia, Portugal, France and Italy. All these countries have better donor rates than England and all have opt-out rather than opt-in systems. Another advantage of such “soft” opt-out systems is that they do not deny or restrict the role of bereaved families, and they allow families to be consulted on the wishes of their loved ones. That is important.

One thing that surprised me about that 43.4 per million figure was how incredibly low it is. Half a million people die in the UK every year, yet just 1% of them die in circumstances or conditions that allow them even to be potential donors. It is important to note that just because someone is on the donor list, that does not mean that they will end up donating their organs, but we need to get the figure as high as possible to help as many people as we can.

We also need the supporting infrastructure to enable those who wish to donate actually to do so. We have all heard about people who have been willing to donate their organs but have, for example, passed away at the weekend in a hospital in which there is no capability to take the organs out of their bodies and transplant them. We need to look carefully at the supporting mechanisms for any changes that are introduced.

Quite a few colleagues have mentioned the need to raise overall awareness, which is linked to the need to encourage family consent. It is telling that in cases where a specialist nurse is involved, donation consent rates are 68.6%, whereas if a specialist nurse is not involved, consent rates plummet to 27.5%. That is clear statistical evidence that when people are provided with
One problem is that there is still an awkwardness or queasiness about the idea of one’s body being examined and operated on post-death. We are often comfortable about that ourselves, but, in the horrible circumstances of someone passing away, particularly if the circumstances are tragic or the death unexpected, our families are particularly queasy about the idea. It is therefore vital that we continue to have these dialogues—that we all go home and have these conversations with our families, including our children, because of course children can also become donors. We must have informed conversations.

It is simply not right that 80% of people say that they would be willing to donate their organs, but only 36% actually register to do so. The number is increasing, but we need it to be much higher. In a well-publicised opt-out system, those figures could converge, and the 20% who are unwilling to donate would have a simple mechanism for making sure that they do not have to do so.

Many years ago, I was asked if I had a private Member’s Bill—I think it was during one of the selection processes—what would it be. It would be exactly this one. The hon. Member for Coventry North West should be in no doubt that I fully support this Bill, and I hope that many of, if not all, our colleagues will do so too.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this very important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) on bringing this Bill forward in the Chamber and on raising our awareness of the issue. I also thank and congratulate my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), on her very emotional, personal and courageous contribution to the debate. I am quite confident that the public and Members will have taken note of it.

Others have spoken at length about the importance of raising donation rates. I have my own personal reasons for supporting the move: my younger brother has been waiting for more than five years for somebody, somewhere, to donate a kidney. He has dialysis four times a week. Another very close personal friend is also going through the same difficult times. Therefore, I have those reasons for supporting the Bill, as well as my own personal views, and a moral commitment to the cause.

As many colleagues have said, more than 6,000 people are still actively waiting for a transplant in the UK. Three people die every day because they cannot get the transplant that they need, ruining family lives across the country. Over the past 10 years, the number of donors has increased by 75%, which is fantastic and has saved countless lives, but there is still a great shortage both in the UK and—as we are a global community—internationally as well. If we go to any country, we are asked, “What are you doing in this field?” I am glad that, once again, Britain is leading in this field, so that the rest of the world can learn and pick up its ideas from here.

Only a third of eventual donors are registered to donate at the time of their death, and this number is even lower among the black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. BAME patients fare far worse than other patients. They will, on average, wait six months longer for a transplant than a white patient. I do apologise if my language is not politically correct, but for convenience, I will use black and white in this case. BAME people face the struggle of comparatively rare blood and tissue types and compatible organs. Although the overall number of donors has increased by 75%, BAME donations have only increased by less than 7%—a fraction of the rate for white people—and that has translated directly into deaths.

There is still a problem with public education and awareness. The families of minority populations are also less likely to consent to organ donation when asked after death: 64% of BAME families refuse permission for donation compared with only 43% for the rest of the population. An opt-out system rather than an opt-in system will increase the likelihood that donors of the same blood and tissue types are available to members of the BAME community. Increasing the number of compatible organs on the transplant list could save thousands of lives each year.

Mr Sharma: I am glad and thankful for the Minister’s very positive intervention and for the information that she has provided to Members in the Chamber. Activist groups and campaigners, such as the National BAME Transplant Alliance, support the move to an opt-out system, because it will ultimately save more lives across our diverse country.

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Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I support everything that my hon. Friend has said. Like him, I represent a constituency with a very high proportion of people from BAME communities. There are not just fewer people consenting to donate their organs, but considerably higher rates of heart disease among these communities. Therefore, particularly for heart transplants, it is very important that we get as many people from BAME communities on to the list in future.

Mr Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was going to raise that matter myself, so I am thankful that he both highlighted and supported it.

Issues such as diabetes, high blood pressure and hepatitis are more common in BAME communities, making their members more likely to need transplant organs. BAME patients make up a third of the kidney transplant waiting list and wait an average of a year longer for a transplant than their white counterparts. Just one person can save or improve up to nine lives. One tragic death can give life to so many through organ donation and even more if they donate tissues as well.
Although ethnic minorities constitute only 11% of the UK population, they make up nearly a quarter of transplant waiting lists, and only six out of every 100 people signed up to the NHS organ donor register are from BAME communities. Opt-out can and will save lives. It respects religious differences and takes away no freedom of expression or belief. Countless constituents of mine have written to urge me to come to the House today to support the Bill, and I am proud to do so and to lend my support to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West.

10.58 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I am delighted to be here to support this Bill today. In doing so, I will not rehearse many of the arguments that have been so ably put already, not least by the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson), whose speech on its own was enough to persuade, I hope, all Members to support this excellent measure today. I am here to tell one story; a story that was initially raised by the hon. Gentleman. It is the story of my constituent, young Keira Ball, and her family.

On Sunday morning, 30 July last year, there was a road traffic collision on the A361, the North Devon link road. It took place only about five miles from my home in North Devon on a stretch of road that is notorious for accidents and that we are working hard to improve. Two vehicles were involved in the accident, one of which was a car carrying members of the Ball family: Keira Ball, her younger brother Brad and their mother Loanna. Their vehicle was in a collision with another. The paramedics, emergency services and all the NHS staff of the three separate hospitals to which those three people were taken undertook brilliant work. But young Keira Ball sadly passed away two days later, on the Tuesday afternoon. She was nine years old. Her mother and brother were very seriously injured. Immediately after Keira’s death, her father Joe took the agonising decision that he wanted his daughter’s death to give life to other people and that young Keira’s organs should be donated.

I have had contact this week with Joe and Loanna Ball, who live in Barnstaple in my constituency. In particular, I sought their permission to tell Keira’s full story today. I wanted to ensure that they were happy for me to do so, which indeed they were. They recognise, as I do, that this story could be an inspiration to others. It could ensure that others sign up for organ donation.

I pay tribute to the campaign by the Daily Mirror that features Max, who has life because of young Keira Ball. It has really helped to push this issue forward. Many people deserve, quite rightly, to have a stake in what I sincerely hope will be the Bill’s success. As I support the Bill, which I will do at every stage, I will be thinking of Max and Keira. It is their Bill and it is thanks to the brave decision taken by Keira’s dad on that most difficult of days that four more people have life who might otherwise have not. That is the best argument for seeing this Bill reach the statute book.

11.5 am

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), who spoke most movingly about the incredibly contribution that his constituent Keira Ball and her family have made to this process. I pay tribute to the role that he has played in bringing that to our attention. He was also right to talk about the cross-party nature of this campaign because this is Parliament at its best. This is how the public expect us to serve in this place—to work co-operatively with others in order to make really important changes.

The House faces a clear choice today. We have the opportunity to make a change that will add huge value to our country and that will undoubtedly save people’s lives. It all boils down to whether we take the opportunity to save hundreds of lives over the coming years. I very much hope that we do not miss that opportunity and that we work together to make this change.

It has been a real privilege to be a part of the campaign that has got us to this point. In particular, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson), who has provided real leadership through his promotion of the Bill. He and I have sat through many meetings—I have lost count of how many—and it is his focus and determination to lead us to this point that have meant that we have an opportunity to do something very worth while today.
I also pay tribute to all the other Members who have provided such outstanding support, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), and other Members—too numerous to mention—right across the House and the political spectrum who have worked together to get us to this point.

It has been mentioned before in this debate, but I also want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Trinity Mirror. The Mirror Group has run a relentless and tireless campaign. Its contribution to this private Member’s Bill and the broader campaign has been massive. It has conducted itself in the very best traditions of a free British press. I know that I speak for all Members when I pay the organisation the largest compliment that I can. We are grateful for everything that it has done.

It is crucial today to pay tributes and to give credit where it is due. I am looking very firmly at the Minister, who has responded in the most brilliantly sensible, co-operative and constructive way. We have sat in a lot of meetings in different places over many months, and in my relatively short time in this House I have not found anybody who has been easier to deal with than she has. She has been a great pleasure to work with, and the leadership that she has shown has been instrumental in ensuring that we have the opportunity to pass this important Bill. I thank her and her officials, who have done an important job in getting us to this place. I urge all hon. Members to think of the common good and to act in a way that I firmly and passionately believe will save countless lives.

It is worth reflecting that of all the people who died in the UK last year, only about 1% died in circumstances that would have made donation possible, meaning that, even though hundreds of thousands of people across the country are registered as potential donors, only a small handful will ever be in a situation that would allow donation to take place. This is one of the main reasons why today in the UK more than 6,000 people are waiting for an organ donation and why nearly 500 people died last year while waiting. This loss of life is devastating but not inevitable.

Today we have a precious opportunity to do something about it, and we must not miss it. Moving to an opt-out system for organ donation will add thousands of names to the donor register, meaning that once the Bill is passed hundreds of lives will be saved. Let us be clear about what the Bill is not. It is not about the state taking control of people’s organs or shaming individuals into donating. If people want to opt out, that is absolutely fine, and I am hugely respectful of any decision people want to make. No questions will be asked; there will be no hard feelings. The Bill is about making it easier for those who might wish to donate to do so.

Sandy Martin: Mention has been made of religiously inclined Jewish people in this country. Some people will feel uncomfortable about the concept of donation. Does my hon. Friend agree that people from various religious traditions—not just one—might feel uncomfortable about this and that it is entirely right to give them the opportunity to opt out, if they wish to do so?

Dan Jarvis: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. He makes an incredibly important point. This is absolutely not about shaming anybody into doing anything they do not want to do. If anybody, for whatever reason, decides they do not wish to be part of the scheme, they have the right to opt out. It is incredibly important that we be clear about that.

It is also worth reflecting on the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn): the current system requires people to take the time to discuss this most serious and difficult matter with their loved ones in order to reach a judgment about whether, in the event of some tragedy occurring, they would want their organs to be donated. It is incredibly important, if people feel they can have that conversation with their loved ones, that they do so, but we understand that people lead busy lives, and many of us will be guilty of not having had these conversations and of putting these tasks on hold.

I believe, however, that we can no longer afford to ignore this issue. It is a matter of life and death for thousands of people around the country, which is why we must increase the number of people on our donor register and make sure we save as many lives as we can and that no more people die waiting for a transplant simply because a potential donor was not able to sign up.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for making such a powerful speech. We often think of donors as being younger people whose bodies and organs are in particularly good shape, but my beloved grandfather, when he died a few years ago—I think he was 96—was able to donate parts of his eyes and so give the gift of sight to other people. We received a letter from the hospital telling us how many people he had been able to help. Everyone has an opportunity, no matter how old they are, to offer that amazing gift to another after they have gone.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, as she always does. As others have said, the Bill is only a part of the way to increase the number of people, whatever their age or background, willing and able to contribute their organs. In concert with the Bill, however, we also need to have an open discussion in our communities about the importance of making a proactive contribution in this way.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) made a very important point about age. I have come here, as somebody of a certain age, with my donor card, which I have carried all my adult life. There is the thought that the organs of someone my age might not be in as good a state as a young person’s and therefore might be less likely to be used in transplants, but bodies can be used for medical research—perhaps into ageing, for example. I like to think that people of my age could still donate their bodies, even if they die from natural causes, and I will make sure that that is included in my will, so that my body could be used for medical research or perhaps for teaching medical students.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It reinforces the notion that, in addition to legislation, all of us who believe in the value of organ donation should ensure that as many people as possible register. The Bill will play an important role in that, but all of us, as leaders in our communities, have an absolute responsibility to get that message across to our constituents.
I do not intend to detain the House much longer, but I do want to make the point that we are lucky and privileged today to be joined by Emma Johnson. Emma is often referred to as “Max’s mom”, although I do not think she minds. As the hon. Member for North Devon mentioned, Max is the 10-year-old who fronted the Daily Mail’s campaign on organ donation. He was kept alive by a tiny metal pump that was in his chest for seven months. I am delighted to learn that, after finally receiving a heart transplant, Max is doing well. His story and that of the sacrifice made by Keira Ball, spoken of movingly by the hon. Gentleman, should serve as an inspiration to us all. We are here today to save lives like Max’s: those of the thousands of people who would benefit from the change set out in the Bill. We have a precious opportunity to make that change today. We have at our fingertips the opportunity to make a powerful, important and meaningful change.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): It is not entirely the same, but my son Max is alive today because he received a stem cell transplant. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to do more to encourage people on to the stem cell register and that, as with transplants, we must get rid of the myths—in this case, that stem cell donation is painful and difficult and that they take part of your spine? None of that is true. It is a very simple process, and one by which many more lives could be saved.

Dan Jarvis: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. None of these things should be particularly contentious. I understand that there are points of debate and that some hon. Members and people in the country have legitimate differences over these most sensitive of matters, but I am encouraged by the level of support today and heartened that we have the support of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. It is incredibly encouraging that the Minister is very supportive and that the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson has given a clear commitment that they will support the Bill. There is overwhelming support for the measure in the House today. So far we have seen Parliament at its very best, and I am keeping my fingers crossed that we can maintain the consensus for the next couple of hours.

11.18 am

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I support the Bill today. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), I am not entirely comfortable with the principle of the state taking control of bodies without express permission, but I think that that option is far less bad than the situation whereby hundreds of lives are unnecessarily lost every year effectively through inertia. We know that action could be taken that most people would agree with. The hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) referred to the massive gap between the number of people who agree with donation and would be willing to be donors and the far smaller number of people who actually register as donors.

None the less, a number of points have been raised with me by constituents that I hope the hon. Gentleman and the Minister will consider during the passage of the Bill to strengthen it further. First, we should strengthen the safeguards—I was reassured by the hon. Gentleman’s comments on this—to make sure that hospitals are absolutely sure whether people are on the register. It must not be a question of, if systems are down, hospitals taking a chance and operating anyway. If people have actively opted out, we need to have belt and braces to make sure that their choices are respected. Secondly, we need to strengthen the existing law in other areas to make sure that in no circumstances can organs be harvested to be sold, which would clearly be outside the scope and the intention of this Bill.

This is a very worthwhile and important Bill. My constituent Sam emailed me this morning to say:

“This important change in legislation will prevent the needless waste of usable healthy organs being sent for cremation when they could instead change many thousands of lives.”

11.20 am

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) for introducing this Bill, which speaks to our common humanity. To be in the Chamber today to support it is a great honour for me. Three people die daily in the UK because of the lack of available organs for transplant, and this Bill would increase the chance of an unwell person and a life-saving organ being united.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), who described very similar situations to those of a member of my family who was successful, in the end, in getting their transplant. She was a mother with a newly born third child. We did not know what was wrong with her. She had no energy, could not pick the other children up from school, was not eating, and was often going to the hospital. Eventually, after her husband took her to hospital, she was whisked off to Birmingham. Fortunately she got a kidney transplant while she was there, but unfortunately it was not successful, and we were told that it was highly unlikely that another suitable kidney would be found within the time when it was needed. Thankfully, we got that kidney, she lived, and three children still had their mum. The trauma that the family went through during that time was just unbelievable. We saw the care that the immediate family had to give those three children when she and her husband—my cousin—were in Birmingham. They took care of the children and did what they could. We have been the recipients of the saving of a family—a dear family.

This Bill will change individuals’ autonomy to choose what happens to their own body. Opt-out organ donation carries with it the weight of 80% public support, the support of the British Medical Association, and cross-party political support—all seven parties are represented among the Members who have sponsored the Bill. It also carries the support of past and present Prime Ministers.

I would like to talk about another case in the town that I represent. Last year, tragically, we lost a little girl aged four, Violet Grace, who was killed in an accident on her way home, with grandma, from the nursery. It was a criminal act, with a car going at 80 mph in a 30 mph zone. The parents of little Violet Grace took the brave decision to donate their four-year-old daughter’s organs. Today, we know that two lives were saved. The family tell me, and all the town, that they get great comfort from that. When her little brother asks about her, they try to explain that to him so that he can grow up with that knowledge.
The parents of Violet Grace have been joined by the widow of another person in my town, Steve Prescott, a former champion rugby league player. He had a multiple organ transplant that was successful, but unfortunately there were some other complications.

Paula Sherriff: Does my hon. Friend agree that although it can sometimes be a difficult conversation, these situations also bring about the opportunity for families, friends and loved ones to talk about what they want to happen after their death, including things like funeral arrangements? I knew from a very early age that when I went, I wanted to donate my organs. I still have my original organ donation card, which is over 30 years old now. Hopefully this debate will get the media attention that will encourage people to have that conversation with those they love.

Ms Rimmer: Yes, I do agree.

Steve Prescott’s widow, along with colleagues, friends and members of the community of St Helens, set up the Steve Prescott Foundation. She also approached the parents of Violet Grace to give comfort and support. They have set up a huge and very successful campaign in our town, urging us all to donate our organs. Steve died, unfortunately. The actual transplant—a multiple organ transplant—was a success, but it was other things that killed him. I pay tribute to the families involved, and to the parents of little Violet Grace for their bravery. This Bill would have saved them the trauma of making that decision at such an emotional time when their little girl was dying. It could save people a lot of trauma.

This is the moment to act. A move to opting out would save a predicted 500 lives a year. Done properly, with the right publicity, the right engagement and the right involvement of all communities, changing the law on organ donation should have the support of all of us. The support shown here today is really gratifying, and I pay tribute to the Daily Mirror, which has run a fantastic campaign. It has urged people sign up for donation even now, without waiting for the change.

I understand—perhaps the Minister could enlighten us on this—that the Government intend to go out to public consultation on how opt-out donation would be implemented sensitively. The proposal in the Bill to involve a person’s family in decisions, as a safeguard against any unregistered objection to donating, is an important protective measure that will reassure families who have concerns.

Only 5,000 people a year in the UK die in circumstances where they can successfully donate, while 6,500 people are currently waiting for life-saving donations. None of us ever expects, or perhaps even thinks about the possibility, that we or someone we love may need an organ from someone else to survive, but many Members have pointed out how it can suddenly happen in our own families. However, there is a gulf between the supply of organs and the urgent need for them, and it is time that we made a conscious decision to take affirmative action. The time is right—80% of the public support organ donation, but only 36% are on the register. That needs to be addressed.

In the first six months since Wales adopted the opt-out, 60 organs donated by 31 people have been transplanted. Consent had been received from 50% of those people. Those are the latest facts from Wales. An opt-out system has therefore been proven to work, even in its infancy. I urge the House to back deemed consent as a proven, popular policy.

The British Medical Association makes a point that goes to the heart of this debate. As a result of this Bill, the choice for the individual about what should happen with their own body will remain the same—to donate, or not to donate—but a change in the law means a switch of the default position, towards donation and towards saving more lives. I urge the House to support the Bill.
religious cultures, customs and beliefs. I hope that people will be able to opt out of donating certain organs. I know that people of some religions, including even some denominations of the Christian faith, do not want to donate their heart, so it is very important that we do not exclude people from this process.

**Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op):** About 10% of people who are signed up to the organ donor register have excluded donating their eyes, sometimes because they are a bit squeamish and sometimes because of the thought of someone else looking through their eyes in the future. Does the hon. Lady agree that in registering as many people as we can to donate, we should preserve people’s ability to opt out of donating organs that they do not wish to donate?

**Michelle Donelan:** I agree. Choice is the key to making the Bill as successful as possible, as is education. Some people might donate those organs if they knew how the process would work, but there needs to be an element of personal choice. It is our body, at the end of the day, and we should be encouraging people to help others rather than forcing them, which will not be successful.

Members have made the point—I do not want to labour it, but it is important—about reaching out to all communities, including those from ethnic minorities, among whom the number of donors is particularly low at the moment. In fact, shockingly, in March 2017 there were not 634 people from the black community in need of organs, and only 72 people on the donor list died and were suitable organ donors. That is a really small proportion.

**Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab):** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue. Our community is experiencing what is called a silent crisis, because of the lack of knowledge and willingness to discuss organ donation with family members and concerns about the integration of the body after death. I take on board what she says—we must be mindful that there is a lack of knowledge among our community, and the Bill would improve that.

**Michelle Donelan:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention.

Only 1% of people a year die in circumstances suitable to allow their organs to be donated. It is important that we have an honest conversation today and do not say that the Bill is the panacea that will solve the problem, and that if someone is on the organ register, they will automatically get a donation. That would give people false hope. That statistic also means that we should potentially review the current regulations on age restrictions for the donation of certain organs. For example, heart valve donations have an age restriction of 60, whereas countries such as Spain just look at the quality of the organ.

ting the most important mechanism for ensuring that the Bill is as effective as possible is transport infrastructure and investment in staffing. It is no good unless we have enough helicopters, bikes, trained staff and support workers to facilitate the Bill. We must ensure that it does not just help people who live in urban areas. My constituency is very rural in parts, and some areas are harder to get to, but that does not mean that people there should be any less likely to benefit from donations.

Other countries that have introduced Bills such as this, including France, Sweden and Bulgaria, have seen a reduction in their organ donation rates partly because of a lack of investment in infrastructure, so that is crucial.

We should be quite bold in reviewing this issue. Some countries have adopted a policy that I admit I was originally very uneasy about, whereby someone who is an organ donor and has not opted out of the system is higher on the priority list to receive a donation. I now think that that is quite fair, because if someone is prepared to give a donation, they should be more likely to receive one.

The UK has one of the lowest donation consent rates in the world, and that is really not good enough. I am hugely supportive of the Bill, but I echo the caution that it depends on the infrastructure, education and support that we give people, so that we can ensure that the Bill is as successful as possible.

11.37 am

**Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) for introducing this important private Member’s Bill. The NHS has just reached the historic milestone of 70 years. As a country and as a society, we are proud of the landmark advances we have made within that time. Because of advances in organ donation and transplantation, 50,000 people are alive today. Most people are willing to donate their organs after they die, but only 36% of the population are on the organ donation register. Organ donation is increasing gradually, but sadly it is not keeping pace with the number of people on the transplant waiting list.

The British Heart Foundation highlights the fact that an average of three people per day die in need of an organ. As someone who was a cardiac nurse in a previous job, I am only too aware of how desperate a patient can become when waiting for an organ to become available. I saw at first hand the distress that people suffered while waiting for a heart transplant or for another organ.

In Spain and Belgium, a softer opt-out approach has facilitated a cultural change that has generated higher donor rates. That is why I am here today supporting my hon. Friend’s Bill, which will address this bleak statistic and bring the discussion of organ donation back to the dinner tables of families across the UK. I also express my sincere thanks to the Daily Mirror for its campaign in support of the Bill, which has shown the public the gift of life that is given by those who donate organs.

One organ donor can transform as many as nine people’s lives. As has been mentioned, the UK has one of the lowest family consent rates in Europe. In Wales, the Welsh Government bravely introduced deemed consent. The rate at which Welsh families are approving rather than refusing the donation of their loved ones’ organs is showing a marked increase compared with the rest of the UK. The latest Welsh organ donation and transplantation statistics display a 72% consent rate, putting Wales above other UK countries.

**Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):** My hon. Friend gives the excellent example of how Wales is leading the way in changing the emphasis on organ donation. Does she share my dismay that no one
from the Scottish National party has joined the debate today? This is a cross-border issue, and the SNP blocked a private Member’s Bill by Anne McTaggart MSP in the Scottish Parliament. Why has the SNP not led the way on this issue?

Karen Lee: I share that concern, and I had hoped that today we could have cross-party consensus. This issue is something on which we can all come together.

I represent Lincoln in the east Midlands, where organ donation is the lowest in the UK. In a year, there were just 74 organ donors in the whole of the east Midlands. In my constituency, there are around 40,000 registered organ donors. I am one of them—my card is in my bag. I am proud of the people of Lincoln, but even though that number represents a pool of opportunity, only a small number of people on the register pass away in such a way that allows their organs to be donated. In the last five years, only 10 deceased donors in Lincoln have been able to donate their organs.

Passing this Bill could save 500 lives a year. We need sensitive dialogue with those suffering from serious illnesses about the possible lifesaving capacity that their donation could have. Should the worst occur. Conversations with grieving families can often be crucial in that process.

Yesterday, I spoke about the loss of my daughter, and when any family member is lost it is a terrible, terrible thing that stays with you forever. However, if someone can donate an organ and turn a negative into a positive, how much better is that? How much better would it be to salvage some positivity out of the situation? The Government have announced a consultation on opt-out consent on organ donation, which closes on 6 March, and the success of this private Member’s Bill might be the vehicle for that change. I hope that the Bill achieves cross-party support and makes progress today.

11.41 am

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) on promoting the Bill, and I know that it will make progress today. As many people have said, 80% of British society support organ donation, but 20% do not. I want to speak on behalf of that 20% to ensure that they are carried along with the debate, rather than left behind.

A gentleman in my constituency, Vijay Patel, was recently unnecessarily killed, and his family took great comfort from the fact that his organs were used to help other people. For me, that is such a gift, and I commend anyone who donates, and their families, for allowing the donation to take place. Many people prepare themselves to be organ donors after they die, and their families are an integral part of that process. Within that wider framework, the crucial role of the donor’s family must be understood, because their role regarding the ownership of the body after a person dies, and their duties towards it, is a central aspect of the grieving process.

There has recently been a lot of concern about a north London coroner who refused to release bodies, which is causing a great deal of concern to my constituents. It therefore follows logically that the family must be involved in organ donation, and I believe that their consent is paramount at the crucial time. Those families need reassurance along their pathway towards consent.

It has been said that there are religious differences on donation, but that is incorrect. Both Islam and Judaism allow organ transplants from live and deceased patients in order to continue and save lives. One factor that perhaps some are not aware of, and that might influence the decision-making process of some families, is how the point of death is decided. Some people regard death as defined by cardiovascular criteria, which is when the heart ceases to function. Others use cessation of brain function—brain stem death—as their criterion. Those two distinctions sometimes make people uncomfortable with donation.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recognised both definitions of death when it formulated the NICE guidelines that explain how healthcare professionals should support a bereaved family when discussing organ donation. There is one pathway for those who accept only cardiovascular death, and another for those who accept brain stem death. As a result, families are helped to understand how they might be able to combine deceased organ donation in a way that does not interfere with some religious traditions.

Enabling someone accessible to guide a family through the donation process is a humane, sensible and constructive proposal. A properly trained and resource transplant co-ordinator should be able to do that, as it is the most important way in which families can be supported at a terrible time in their lives. In practice, however, under the system proposed, there would be less institutional incentive for health services to employ such people.

The Government are aware of the issues around transplantation, and they cannot plead ignorance in that our religious communities are being unresponsive to human need. In 2013, leading Muslim and Jewish groups wrote jointly to the Government suggesting a way forward in which an enhanced and improved opt-in system could be introduced that would alleviate their concerns. Improvements would include a Government-backed statement that Jews and Muslims could sign, which would enable them to donate organs in a manner compatible with their beliefs. If that approach were to be adopted, it would enable the two communities to be even more supportive of an opt-in system than they have been in the past. That proposal has been raised on several occasions, but I am afraid it has been ignored. The hon. Member for Coventry North West mentioned former Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks, who he said opposed such measures. As I understand it, however, the current Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Mirvis, is in favour of the proposal I have just outlined.

Life, and indeed death, has changed for many people. More people want, understandably, to spend their final months at home. If they die at home, organ donation is much less likely. Healthcare professionals who need to secure consent for donation must have a conversation with organ donors, and their loved ones, about why they are best placed to give the gift of life if they remain in hospital. That conversation is a natural feature of an opt-in service. Under an opt-out service, there will be little incentive to have that complex discussion with potential donors and their families. The result could be that patients might drift to spend their last months in hospital.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I ask my hon. Friend, as a doctor, how quickly the medical profession can assess whether someone who has died...
is the right sort of person for a donation? So few people are the right fit for a donation—1%, as I understand.

Dr Offord: I cannot mislead the House, because unfortunately I am not a medical doctor and I am not able to answer that question. I am certainly content to talk about socio-economic deprivation in places such as Cornwall, which was part of my PhD thesis, but I will leave the issue raised by my hon. Friend alone. He mentioned the 1%, but other potential donors and their families could be intimidated by clinical settings, have problems with language skills or be too emotionally distraught actively to engage with a system that lacked incentives to ensure professional support throughout their decision-making process. Such potential donors and families could find their rights eroded in that practice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) made a point that I wish to echo. The underlying question raised by some considerations is whether public services should treat patients and their families as citizens whose active consent must be sought as a legal duty, or as subjects whose ability to choose whether to donate or not depends on the goodwill of well-meaning but overstretched professionals. Ultimately, an opt-in system harnesses the role of both religious and civil society to increase organ donation from deceased donors is, for me, the best way forward to maximise organ donation while defending not only religious freedoms, but the rights of all potential donors and families.

11.48 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I will keep my remarks brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. I too support the Bill and I am delighted that the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson)—my hon. Friend; I have known him for a number of years—has used this slot for this very noble cause.

I would like to mention the Bright Green Stars campaign in Torbay. Four years ago, the Bright Green Star Man hung up stars across various points in the bay to encourage more people to think about organ donation. When his daughter Lottie was three, she was one of the lucky ones to receive a transplant very quickly.

The safeguards in the Bill provide an option for those who strongly object to the idea of organ donation, and the ability for families to provide evidence that someone would have objected, on reasonable grounds, if they had known about the opt-out system. Let us be clear: I do not see my body as a piece of property that my relatives will inherit on my death. I see it as something very special, and if there is something we can do to help people to continue to live after our life on this earth has finished, I think that is totally noble. One way I can help is not just by registering to be an organ donor, but by supporting the Bill today. It will save lives in Torbay and across the country. I hope the Bill receives its Second Reading.

11.50 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) for securing this very important debate, for introducing this very important Bill and for his powerful and moving opening speech. I would also like to thank the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), the hon. Members for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), for Dudley South (Mike Wood), for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and for Hendon (Dr Offord), and my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and for Lincoln (Karen Lee) for their excellent speeches.

In particular, I pay huge tribute to my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott). She spoke so bravely and movingly about her daughter Rebecca, who as we heard has been on dialysis for a year awaiting a kidney transplant. I hope from the bottom of my heart—I am sure we all do—that her wait is over very soon and she is successful in receiving that gift of life from a wonderful donor.

This has been an excellent debate and an example of this House at its best, as it often is on Fridays during debates on private Members’ Bills. I would like to thank hon. Members who have previously brought this issue to our attention over the past decade or so, including my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and for Barnsley Central.

I commend the Daily Mirror for its fantastic campaign to raise awareness of organ donation since the case of Max Johnson, who we have all heard so much about this morning. He was then a nine-year-old boy in need of a new heart. I understand he is now 10, which is fantastic. I want to thank the hon. Member for North Devon for telling us all about Keira Ball, Max’s donor, who I understand saved four lives. I thank her very, very brave family for taking that brave decision on that most awful of days. I also thank the more than 13,000 people who have now signed the Change.org petition.

I also commend the scriptwriters of “Coronation Street”—of which, it has to be said, I am a huge fan as a northerner—for covering this issue so well. I note that the character Carla Connor this week received a kidney from her half-brother and that all is going well. At their best, soaps can play a huge part in helping to inform the public on such issues. I hope the storyline will touch on the importance of being on the organ donation register. Finally, I pay tribute to the thousands of people who have already participated in the Government’s public consultation on organ donation. I encourage others to do so, if they have not done so already, to let their voices be heard.

The topic of organ donation is understandably an emotional one, but I am pleased that so many people are now engaging in this debate and that we have the opportunity to discuss it in the House today. This debate and the publicity around it may encourage families up and down the country to have that important discussion about organ donation before the inevitable happens. There is no doubt that these discussions need to be had and that we need more organ donors in England. Almost 25 million people are on the organ donation register, but according to the NHS blood and transplant service, 7,000 people are waiting on the list for new organs. For them, it really is a life or death situation, so it is important that as many people as possible sign up to the organ donation register.

Over the past five years, almost 5 million people have joined the register, and in 2016-17 we saw the highest ever deceased donor rates in England. More than 50,000 people are living with a functioning transplant—Max is one
of them—thanks to organ donation and transplantation in the UK. These are welcome developments, but we still have a long way to go. We currently lag behind other western countries. Tragically, around 1,000 people die every year—that is three a day—while waiting for a transplant. To save those lives, we need more people on the organ donation register making those decisions with their family's knowledge, so that when the time comes, more lives can be saved.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend makes an excellent case by citing statistics in England, but this is a cross-border issue as well. A great strength of our national health service is that no matter what part of the UK someone comes from, they can benefit from an organ transplant. If someone in Dumfries needs a kidney donation and the donor is from Carlisle, there will be no barrier or border to getting access to that transplant. That is why MPs from all parts of the UK should support organ donation changes in all parts of the UK. That includes the Scottish National party; it is just a shame that SNP Members are not here today. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes, and I had not noticed that nobody from the Scottish National party is here. I do not know what the situation is in Scotland, but we still want people there to be organ donors. I am sure that Rebecca, the daughter of my hon. Friend, would not refuse a kidney, whether from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or anywhere, so that is a very good point.

Mr Sweeney: Will my hon. Friend recognise the great strides that the Labour party in Scotland has made in trying to bring in legislation on opt-out organ donation there? It is unfortunate that the Scottish National party blocked the progress of a Bill from Anne McTaggart MSP in the last session of the Parliament, but there is still hope, because a private Member's Bill is progressing through the Scottish Parliament. We hope to have Labour and cross-party support to see such legislation progress in Scotland, as well as in Wales and England.

Mrs Hodgson: Excellent. I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for updating us all on the situation in Scotland because, as I said, I was not aware of it. I commend that Bill and hope that our SNP friends up in Scotland will act on and progress it as soon as possible.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I pay tribute to colleagues in Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) and colleagues from across the country. We heard very moving stories from colleagues from North Devon and other parts. We as a House have demonstrated the ability to work together today, and that is so important. One of the great strengths of the debate has been the way that we have focused on families and listened to their stories. For me, that has been a deeply moving experience. I commend to colleagues the importance of continuing to listen to families as the campaign goes forward.

Mrs Hodgson: Families are at the heart of this, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West, who is promoting the Bill, made clear, and I am sure that the Minister will as well. It is important that families' voices are taken into consideration when these discussions take place.

I know that I am not alone in this House in carrying a donor card and being on the register. Like many other organ donors, I signed myself up because of a direct family experience. My Aunty Ella, who is sadly no longer with us, was one of the first patients to receive a kidney transplant at the fantastic Freeman Hospital in Newcastle way back in 1967. It was pioneering surgery back then, and it is great to hear my fellow Sunderland MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central, also commending the work of the fantastic renal team at the Freeman Hospital who are currently treating and supporting her daughter Rebecca so well. My Aunty Ella lived a full life because of her transplant. In those days, it was perhaps not as long as she would have liked, but she was able to see her children Norman and Stephen—my cousins—grow up to get married. All she wanted to do was to see them grow up, but she lived on to see them give her grandchildren. That is what organ donation is all about: it gives people a future. Just one donor can save up to nine people—as we heard, Keira Ball saved four—and it can give those nine people a future with their loved ones, which is why it is so important.

Of course, there are some concerns among some religious communities. We heard about that earlier from the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), the shadow Secretary of State for Health, has met representatives of one particular Jewish community to discuss their concerns. There are also concerns among black and minority-ethnic communities, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). Although they are more susceptible to illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension and even heart disease, only 35% of black and Asian people in the UK—where the population average is 63%—agreed to organ donation last year.

Mark Tami: The same applies to stem cell transplants, which I raised earlier. It simply is not acceptable that those who happen to be white probably have an 80% to 90% chance of finding a possible match, whereas for those who come from a certain ethnic background the figure could be as low as 30%. I do not think we would accept that in any other walk of life.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend has made exactly the right point. This does not apply only to, for instance, kidney and heart transplants; it applies to the whole donor register. The Government must listen to the concerns of black and Asian communities, not just during the consultation but beyond, so that we can develop a solution to this problem.

Eleanor Smith: I hope that the Bill succeeds and that there will be consultation with members of the BME community to ensure the successful delivery of a public education programme to increase awareness.

Mrs Hodgson: That is precisely the point. It is a question of education and public awareness as well as the acceptance of the sensitivities that exist among all people, not just members of particular religious or ethnic-minority communities.
Mr Virendra Sharma: I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend while she is making such a strong point. One of my constituents rang me after my speech to suggest first that, perhaps because my Parliament could not run roadshows, along with members of their local voluntary sectors, to raise awareness and to encourage people to register as donors and secondly that we could encourage the local education system to enable schools and parents’ associations to run awareness sessions. Would that not be the best way of both raising awareness and engaging with communities?

Mrs Hodgson: Absolutely. I think that schools are an ideal forum for a number of public health awareness messages on a host of issues to be delivered to young people.

Perhaps the solution to all these concerns has been developed in the two countries where the opt-out system is working well, Wales and Spain. In Wales, the system came into force in 2015. The law sets out that those who live and die there will be deemed to have given consent for their organs to be used unless they have explicitly said otherwise. Before that change in the law came into effect, a public awareness campaign alone resulted in an increase in the number of organs transplanted from 120 to 160. That was not huge, but it was a definite start. NHS organ donation statistics show an 11.8% increase between 2014-15 and 2016-17 in the number of people in Wales opting to donate their organs. That was the highest increase among England, Wales and Scotland. Although there has not been a notable change since the law came into effect, it is worth remembering that—as we heard earlier—Spain took almost 10 years to increase organ donation rates significantly.

Spain has had a soft opt-out system for 39 years. It is considered to be the world leader in organ donation and currently has the highest organ donation rates in the world. In Spain, consent is presumed in the absence of any known objection by the deceased, but family consent is still sought, as it would be here, we hope. In the immediate aftermath of this change in law, there was only a small increase in the number of organ donations and transplants, but there was a dramatic increase after 1989, when the Spanish Government made a big push to reorganise organ donation, as a result of which there was a medically trained transplant co-ordinator in every hospital by 1999.

It is unlikely that we here in the UK will have an identical opt-out system to Spain’s, but these are just two examples showing how an opt-out system can work and improve the lives of thousands of people waiting for an organ transplant. This also gives us the opportunity to learn from past experiences, to ensure we get it right in this country, which I am sure we all seek to do. I know the Government will be working to ensure that is what happens, and the Opposition are passionate about world-class health services, but, as the NHS Blood and Transplant service made clear, we “will never have a world-class donation and transplantation service if more than 4 out of every 10 families say no to donation.”

Some 90% of people surveyed by the British Heart Foundation say they support organ donation, but just 33% of those surveyed are on the NHS organ donor register. It is clear from what we have heard today that more people need to be on the organ donor register, and these difficult conversations must be encouraged, so that more lives can be saved.

Luke Pollard: During this debate, I went on to my phone and signed up as a full organ donor. Previously, I was a bit squeamish about giving my eyes, but I have been convinced by the arguments. Signing up only took two minutes; it was simple to do, and every Member could be encouraging our constituents to do so, too, by just going on to their phone and registering now, so we can get more donors before this Bill becomes law.

Mrs Hodgson: That would be great. Even the most technophobe of us should be able to manage doing that if it takes only two minutes, and maybe there could be one of those clever apps to make it even easier for all the young people to do this.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I have no knowledge of apps, but I do have my donor card here, held proudly in my hand, which I got by telephoning. When I introduced my Bill on this subject many years ago, I was accused, as were the supporters—including Dr Evan Harris, who brought in the Bill with me—of being Aztecs. Does my hon. Friend agree that the tide is now flowing in our favour and this is a piece of legislation whose need has been proven, but whose time is now?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes, very good, and I must apologise for not commending my hon. Friend for his Bill when I listed the people who had done work on this over the years. That makes us realise how many people have been pushing for this, and if my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West is successful today, his great achievement will be following in many other Members’ footsteps.

Whether it is clever people with their apps or people carrying the old-fashioned donor card, we in the Opposition and nearly all of us, or perhaps all of us unanimously, across the House this morning are in favour of a change to the organ donation law, to ensure that everybody whose life could be saved by organ transplant can have the gift of life. I therefore urge the Minister today to take the necessary steps to increase the number of people on the organ donor register, and I am sure this Bill will be a great asset in helping her to achieve that goal.

12.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) for bringing this Bill to the House; he has secured his fortunate position in the ballot and used it constructively. I am therefore grateful to him and confirm that the Government will give his Bill our wholehearted support. It has been an absolute pleasure to work with him and the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and to get to the place we are in now, having a Bill we can all support. The reason why we are here, in a relatively painless way given our discussions, is that we were all focused on the shared objective of saving lives and securing the availability of more organs for donation. I am extremely grateful to him, and I wish the Bill Godspeed and hope that it gets on to the statute book as soon as possible.

We have heard some moving stories today, and I want to make particular reference to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), who talked about the bravery of Keira Ball, who has saved four lives. I shall say a little more about that later. I also
[Jackie Doyle-Price]

want to thank the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), who spoke movingly about her daughter. The real thing about this subject is that once we hear the human stories about people who have given organs, consented to their relatives doing so when they have been bereaved, witnessed family members needing an organ or indeed been a live donor, we cannot fail to be touched by their experiences. It is certainly with considerable commitment that I will do my bit to ensure that more organs become available for donation.

**Mark Tami:** I have spoken briefly about my own experience with my son, who was able to get a stem cell donor. We were in hospital for quite some time, and I saw many parents who did not find a donor. That was very difficult, and, to be frank, I felt a degree of guilt because we were fortunate and I knew that I was looking at someone whose child was going to die. That is a heartbreaking situation, and we need to do whatever we can to ensure that more people get on to the register and donate organs.

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** The hon. Gentleman puts that as well as it could possibly be expressed. That is entirely the motivation behind the Bill. We are losing too many people each year because they need organs, and it would be a poor Health Minister who did not do their best to remedy that. He is absolutely right to describe the very real impact when we see people in that situation. I have been on my own journey with my constituent, who has already been mentioned by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). My constituent painfully lost her daughter, who was waiting for a transplant, and she has used that experience to campaign for this important cause. She has also taken the step of becoming an altruistic donor herself. Who could fail to be inspired by such a story? I am pleased to be able to deliver on the promise that I made to Patricia, when she came to see me for the first time, that I would do everything I could to secure more organ donations. And here we are today, delivering that.

Last October, the Prime Minister pledged her personal support to change the law on organ donation and, in doing so, to help more people across the country to achieve an organ transplant. We should also remember the contribution of Max Johnson, whose struggle was embraced by the nation and who has done so much to highlight this important cause. As a consequence, we in the Government will be referring to this legislation as Max’s law, and we will do everything we can to ensure its passage. In that regard, I am grateful for the Opposition’s support, which will ensure that it has a speedy passage. With such cross-party commitment, we should not fail. As Max, his family and families all over the country who have experienced life on the transplant waiting list know, organ donation is a precious gift, and the family of Keira Ball deserve our special tribute. The fact that she has saved four lives is incredibly inspirational.

I want to echo the tributes that have been paid to the *Daily Mirror*. We do not often talk about national newspapers in a complimentary way in this House, but the *Daily Mirror* has done a fantastic job of highlighting this cause. This illustrates what the press can achieve when it puts its mind to something positive. I echo the tribute paid to “Coronation Street” by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). Like her, I am pretty addicted to the soaps, and we should not leave out “EastEnders”, which highlighted live liver transplantation last year. She was right to say that the soap operas have also been good at highlighting mental health, but it is particularly apposite that we have seen the organ donation story this week. I commend “Coronation Street” for tweeting a link to the Government consultation in the immediate wake of that programme, which I think is a first. It would be helpful if soap operas highlighted future Government consultations, but I do not think it will be common.

I will be fairly brief in addressing some of the points that have been raised. A number of Members expressed concern about moving from an opt-in system to an opt-out system, and I reassure them that the concept of organ donation being a gift voluntarily given by the donor remains central to the Bill’s principles. There can be no question of the state taking control of organs, which is why the ability to opt out is central to the Bill. Opting out will have to be made extremely easy, and people will have to be able to continually revisit their decision if they wish to change their mind.

It is also central to the Bill that family consent is respected. The circumstance in which someone is able to donate their organs is clearly traumatic and difficult. In considering the whole period at the end of life and the struggle that surgeons are undertaking to save lives, it is important that we are sensitive about that time. We need to be sure that, once someone has lost the capacity to give consent, their family, as next of kin, have their rights protected. I have no doubt that we will explore some of those issues in Committee.

I put on record the representations I have had from the medical establishment, which would feel uncomfortable if consent were not sought from the family. In developing a regime that secures more organs but is also sensitive to everybody’s views, we are able to strike the right balance in the Bill.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): I entirely support the Bill. Has the Department given any early thought to public engagement, so that people are aware of any changes coming into force and of what those changes mean?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** My hon. Friend will be aware that we are consulting on the principles enshrined in this Bill. That consultation will end on 6 March, and we will reflect on those representations. As we have already heard, we are seeing an unprecedented response to the consultation, and there is a substantial degree of support. The consultation will inform our communications.

We have also heard a lot about the high incidence of people from Asian and black backgrounds on the waiting list, and again that is a priority for the Government. The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) said MPs should show leadership. We are leaders, and it is certainly something that I want to do. I have a large black African community in my constituency that I am engaging with on this issue. With that in mind, I have asked NHS Blood and Transplant to develop MP toolkits that we can all use to go out into the community to sell the concept of organ donation. And as and when those toolkits are available, I hope to have support from many Members in rolling out that communication.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?
Jackie Doyle-Price: I would like to make progress, so I will take no more interventions.

As I have made clear, we support the Bill and are determined to secure more organs for transplant, because we are concerned that we are losing lives unnecessarily. People have referred to the experience in Wales and whether the learning from that will achieve a material difference. At this stage, it is too early to draw any conclusions about the number of organs that the change in Wales has secured, but we have seen an increase in consent and opting on to the register. Our best estimates are that the change will secure an additional 100 donors a year, which could lead to the saving of 200 extra lives.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will take no more interventions.

On the basis that we could save 200 lives, we wholeheartedly support the Bill. I look forward to working with all Members to secure Royal Assent.

12.19 pm

Mr Robinson: I do not much like self-congratulation, and moments when the House gets self-congratulatory can be embarrassing, but on this occasion I am delighted to say that we have seen the House at its best. I say that because we have had a debate where not only have high standards of rational argument been deployed, but deep emotions—we all feel them—have not been kept from us. That unique combination today has enabled us to have the cross-party consensus of the size we have achieved, on a Second Reading of a Bill that is, perhaps, contentious in nature in some respects. I note that the Secretary of State for Health has just arrived and so, while plaudits are being awarded, may I just say that his support from the very beginning has given great encouragement to me and to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis)?

This is a great moment for us. I hope that there will not be a Division, but I am sure that if there is one, we will win it. I am sure that we will be able to go out of the Chamber knowing that the Bill has passed its hurdle of Second Reading, that we are going into Committee and that with any fair wind from the Government by the end of the year we will have the Act—Max’s Act, as we will pass an Act for life, and I am delighted, on that moment and to saying that, at least in this Parliament, we did pass an Act for life, and I am delighted, on that note, to be able to conclude the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Overseas Electors Bill

Second Reading

12.22 pm

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I wish to say at the start, as an organ donation activist for more than 25 years, how excellent I thought the first debate today was. Although I did not agree with everything that was said, I thought it showed the UK Parliament excelling and at its very best, as the Bill’s promoter told us.

My Bill is about extending the capacity of UK citizens to participate in British democracy, of which we have seen such a wonderful example today. Let me begin by setting the scene by providing what I see as the most relevant statistics. According to the Office for National Statistics, there are 4.9 million British citizens of voting age who have lived in the UK at some point in their lives but are now overseas.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Glyn Davies: I will, because he is such an honourable friend.

Paul Flynn: I want to thank my hon. Friend—I have been calling him that for many years now—for the support he has given to a Bill that we could be debating after this one. My appeal to him is on the basis of the powerful reasons why this House should pass the Legalisation of Cannabis (Medicinal Purposes) Bill: the absurdity of the current law and the suffering that has resulted. I know he will not speak for very long, as his speeches are always brief but potent. I ask him to encourage his fellow supporters of his Bill to allow time for the cannabis Bill to be debated.

Glyn Davies: I have always so admired my hon. Friend’s brass neck that I am probably going to accede to his request. I was intending to do this, so while pointing out to the Chamber why I am intending to keep my comments brief, let me say that giving him the opportunity to put his Bill forward later this afternoon is something I rather approve of.

Now then, where did I get to? I was starting off with the relevant statistics. Only an estimated 1.4 million of the 4.9 million British citizens of voting age who live overseas are eligible to vote in UK elections, because a British citizen who has lived overseas for more than 15 years is not allowed to vote in British elections. As at June 2017, only 285,000 of those 1.4 million were actually registered to vote. That is another important issue that will probably need to be addressed, but it is outside the scope of my Bill.

I thank colleagues from the Government and Opposition Benches who have contacted me in support of the Bill. I have had good advice from the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), who has been a big help, and my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) has also been a great help. Several other Members have written to me to offer their support.

This debate touches on so many issues that I could speak for a long time, but there are a number of reasons why I shall not. I want to give as many Members the
chance to contribute as possible and I want the debate to reach its conclusion today, if at all possible, so I shall speak probably for no more than five minutes. Of course, I also want to accede to the request that the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) just made.

**Dame Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing the Bill. I hope that, despite the protestations of the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), he will not cut short his remarks, because this is an important matter. Does he agree that as the United Kingdom is now leaving the European Union, it is even more important that we re-establish and firm up our relationships with British citizens, wherever they may live around the world? That is what makes the Bill so important.

**Glyn Davies:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention on a point to which I shall come later.

Of the three points on which I shall concentrate, the first is fairness to UK citizens who live abroad and who have moved around for various reasons but want to remain part of our democratic process and not have their involvement cut short after 15 years.

Secondly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) just said, a benefit flows to the UK through the soft power of British citizens around the world retaining a close involvement in what happens in this country and promoting our interests in the country to which they have moved. The last thing we need is to make their involvement in this country less relevant.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I assume that if a British citizen has lived abroad for, say, 30 years, their children will be British. Under my hon. Friend’s Bill, would those British children be allowed to vote as well?

**Glyn Davies:** That is another issue to which I shall refer later. As I build the three points I wish to make, that will be very much part of the first.

My third point is about why it is right to revisit an issue—the restriction of overseas UK citizens’ ability to vote—that Parliament has considered previously. What has changed?

On my first point, fairness, many British citizens who have moved overseas have a legitimate ongoing interest in the UK’s public affairs and politics. Many spent all their working lives in the UK, paying their taxes and national insurance, and continue to have a direct interest in their pension rights and particularly in the future of their families in the UK. Many moved to work and did not have much choice, but will eventually return home to the UK on their retirement. Many have family connections that they wish to retain, and many want to retain those communications through these unseen processes that maintain British influence all over the world.

Our ambition, I think, is to extend the franchise to everybody who has a legitimate interest and are desperately keen to be part of our democracy.

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con) rose—

**Glyn Davies:** I will give way after I have made one point.

This is something that was quite dramatic for me. About three weeks ago, a gentleman named Harry Shindler—some Members here may have met him—came all the way from Italy to Britain to talk to me about this Bill. Harry Shindler is an incredible man. He is 97 years old and the longest-serving member of the Labour party. He is still an activist—in fact, he left the deputy leader of the Labour party unable to speak for about half an hour in the Tea Room, which is quite an achievement. He came all the way to talk to me because the one thing that he wants to do before he dies is to vote again in a British election. That is how important it is to some UK citizens living overseas to be able to vote in our elections.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Glyn Davies:** I will; I have already mentioned the hon. Gentleman in my speech.

**Mike Gapes:** I am very sorry that I was slightly late for this debate. I was in the Library and did not notice the screen, showing that the previous debate had finished. My friend—I can call him that for various reasons—mentioned Harry Shindler. He knows that I was also at the meeting with Harry Shindler. I have known Harry Shindler for many years. He has taken legal action against the Government, taken the issue to the European Court and has resolutely done so because he represents not just people in the Labour party, but the whole community of people with British heritage who are living all over the world.

**Glyn Davies:** I thank my friend for that intervention, and I agree absolutely with his point. If everybody in this House were to meet and talk to Harry Shindler, there would not be a single person who was not a supporter of my Bill.

**Jack Lopresti:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Glyn Davies:** Oh, I am sorry, yes. I had promised to give way previously.

**Jack Lopresti:** On a purely practical point, obviously some of our people are scattered far and wide in remote areas without access to a reliable postal service. Is there provision in the Bill—by the way, I congratulate my hon. Friend on presenting it—to use our consulates and embassies as polling stations to collect ballot papers and return them in diplomatic pouches to the UK?

**Glyn Davies:** A lot of detail will be involved in this Bill. That matter will probably be dealt with in Committee—I just hope that it will go through to Committee so that we can deal with that then. The Minister who is responding later will have picked up on that point.

**Mr Dominic Grieve** (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I wholly support this measure. Does he agree that, actually, many people were very hurt when this Parliament reduced the period from 20 to 15 years, quite gratuitously, giving overseas voters the impression that they were not valued? There is a marked contrast between the way we deal with this matter in this country and how it is dealt with
in many other countries, such as France, which embraces its overseas voters, wishes them to maintain the link, sees them as valued, and makes every effort to ensure that they can participate in the national political life of the country.

Glyn Davies: That is another intervention that I greatly welcome and that accords totally with my thinking. It is damaging, yes. We have moved away from the principle of having any restriction at all, which is sensible. I want to come on to that point, but, first, I will take another intervention.

JohnPenrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and echo the congratulations of many in this Chamber to him on bringing forward this very, very important Bill. I just wanted to respond to his reply to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) about how the voting might happen. As one of the original co-authors of this Bill when it was being done by the Government in the Cabinet Office, I can say that we looked at it very closely and concluded that if we have a multi-constituency election, it is incredibly complicated to have different ballot papers for every single constituency in the local post in whichever country it might be. Superficially, it is possibly an attractive idea, but at the time, we felt that it was very, very difficult. Perhaps the Minister can clarify whether opinions have changed.

Glyn Davies: I am sure that the Minister will clarify that point because not only have I invited her to do so, but my hon. Friend has too.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Glyn Davies: May I make just one brief point?

I just want to emphasise how many people—people unknown to me—who have written to me from overseas just to thank me for this Bill. Their level of appreciation is huge, as is the importance they attach to being able to just to thank me for this Bill. Their level of appreciation is huge, as is the importance they attach to being able to participate in the national political life of the country.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing forward this Bill. Many areas of our constitution are controversial and partisan, but when I was a Minister in the Cabinet Office I was struck by the fact that Members of Parliament from all parties, particularly the Labour party, wrote to me on behalf of their constituents every single week to ask when the Government would deliver on this manifesto commitment. This is a non-partisan Bill that the House would be wise to take forward in a non-partisan approach. My hon. Friend mentioned the example of 97-year-old Labour voter and activist Harry Shindler, who fought in the Battle of Anzio in 1944. People like him gave so much for this country; we should pass this Bill and give them back their vote in return.

Glyn Davies: It is important—certainly to me—that this is a non-partisan Bill. I have brought it forward because it will deliver justice to UK citizens living abroad. There are supporters on the Conservative Benches because I have asked them all to come. I am overwhelmed by their personal support, but I know they also think this is an important issue.

My second general point is on the importance of the Bill to British soft power across the world. We live in an increasingly interdependent world. The success and influence of British citizens overseas become ever more important, particularly as we leave the European Union. In Europe and across the wider world, our British interests are well served by the presence of UK citizens who are actively involved in civic society, businesses and diplomatic activity in the countries in which they now live. It is a hugely important way in which the British voice can use its presence overseas to the great benefit and interest of Britain. The absolutely last thing we should do in promoting the interests of Britain across the world is to discriminate against our own citizens who have moved overseas by taking away their right to vote after 15 years. It is a huge mistake.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that many of these Brits living abroad are also working for British companies whose revenues often fund public services here in this country?

Glyn Davies: Indeed I do. Britain’s soft power—that important exercise of British influence throughout the world—is greatly benefited by British citizens in British businesses overseas being active in British politics through voting for Members of this House, who then develop their views, opinions and influence.

My third point concerns what has changed. We have heard reference already to changing the 20-year limit to a 15-year limit. There used to be a five-year limit, so there is legislative uncertainty. In addition, what has changed is the advent of the internet and the ability to
keep in touch. The rationale for having any limit is that after a while people lose their connections. It is thought that after 15 years they will have lost touch with what is happening in Britain and will no longer have that connection with family and so on, but the internet has completely changed that. People have not just that ease of connection —through Facebook, Skype and everything else—but access to much cheaper flights and travel. The ability to connect across the world now is such that it no longer makes sense to have any limit at all. It is no longer relevant. It might have been 15 years ago, but it certainly is not now.

The Bill would extend the franchise, whenever it was reasonable to do so, to British citizens. We have already had reference to 100 years ago, and that is what we have been doing for the last 100 years, step by step. This is the centenary of one of the biggest extensions of the franchise in our history. I genuinely believe that it is right to extend the franchise by removing the limit on residency abroad. If they are British citizens, they should be able to vote in a UK parliamentary election. This is a wonderful Parliament—the debate earlier made me realise just how wonderful—and we are all privileged to serve in it. I hope that through the Bill we can ensure that UK citizens abroad who still care deeply about Britain and feel deeply British, as Harry Shindler does, can participate in our parliamentary democracy.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I am extremely interested in what the hon. Gentleman has to say. I am intrigued by proposed new section 1A, which refers to the constituency linkage. The Bill proposes that if somebody lived in a property that has subsequently been demolished—it might be a hole in the ground or a sheep farm in north Wales, for all I know—they should still have a vote in respect of that constituency. This sounds a little like rotten boroughs. Is he absolutely confident and secure about a property that no longer exists remaining the basis for someone having a vote—and, if the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) is correct, for their grandchildren, great grandchildren and so on, in perpetuity, also having a vote?

Glyn Davies: If someone is a UK citizen, they should, in my view, have a right to vote in a UK general election. It is as simple as that. An arbitrary time limit, be it 15, 20 or five years, is no longer appropriate and only means that it will have to come back to us in the future for further debate. Let us get rid of it altogether and make it straightforward: UK citizens can vote in UK elections—and let that be it.

12.44 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): The 13 North American colonies south of the Great Lakes fought a bloody war of independence from the jurisdiction of this place largely on the basis of the slogan, “No taxation without representation”. That was a very good point—a fundamental constitutional point. It was wrong that they should have been forced to pay taxes but have absolutely no say in what those taxes should be. Perhaps, if the voices of reason in Britain at the time had been listened to, the Americans might not have felt the need to leave British jurisdiction. Perhaps, if the American colonists—and, by extension, as our political and social awareness progressed in the 20th century, the native Americans as well—had been allowed to vote for parliamentary representatives and send them to this place, and that pattern had been followed in other British colonies around the world, our country might have been able to found a worldwide commonwealth of nations based on democracy and equality, and work steadily away from a world based on warfare between nations and racial resentments.

Leaving aside the thought that the world might have been a very much better place if that war of independence had never been fought, I would like to suggest that the slogan, “No taxation without representation”, works perfectly well the other way round: “No representation without taxation”.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I may be misunderstanding the hon. Gentleman, but is he suggesting that paying income tax should be a qualification for the franchise?

Sandy Martin: No, I am not suggesting that: I am suggesting that if someone lives within a polity in which a taxation level is being set, they should have the opportunity to make decisions about how it is set. I will come to that point later on.

Mike Gapes: Is my hon. Friend saying that somebody who has worked and contributed taxation in this country for 20, 30 or 40 years, and who then retires abroad and lives there for the next 20 or 30 years, is somehow disenfranchised even though they have paid taxes here?

Sandy Martin: I am saying something fairly similar, yes. If someone is living, paying taxes and working in a country, they are also accruing pension rights and contributing to the society in which they live, and that society then has some obligations towards them if they decide to move abroad. That is a very good point, and I will come on to it later. However, I am not prepared to accept that somebody living in a country other than the country that they are making decisions for should get a level of taxation in the country that they are not living in.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I am interpreting the hon. Gentleman’s remarks to mean that far from seeking to remove the restriction on the duration within which people can vote, he is seeking to tighten it, and arguing that there should be no right to vote for any British citizens living abroad. Is that really what he is saying?

Sandy Martin: I will reach that point in my speech at some stage—I have got through only one paragraph so far. I wish to make a large number of points, and I cannot make them all instantaneously. I can address them in a random order depending on when Conservative Members want to raise them, or I can address them in the order in which I have written them down. It is entirely up to them which way they want me to take them.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Would he care to comment on the several million UK citizens who pay no tax in this country yet have a perfect right to vote? Would he
also care to comment on people who are overseas for more than 15 years and have no right to vote on how their pension, their health service and a number of other UK taxpayer services are provided?

Sandy Martin: I will be delighted to address the points about pensions and people who do not currently pay taxes later on in my speech. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He has mentioned some very sensible points that I assure him I will address.

I return to “no representation without taxation”. I do not know who said that taxes are how we pay for a civilised society, but it is certainly as true today as it was when it was said. None of us can imagine a society with no police force, no health service, no education, no courts, no transport systems, no mechanism for adjudication between those of different views—[Interruption.] Does the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) want me to give way, or is he just chuntering?

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Carry on, I’m enjoying every minute!

Sandy Martin: If the hon. Gentleman were to listen, he might hear how wonderful it was.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Can we not have this dialogue across the Chamber? We need to listen to what Sandy Martin has to say and not have so much chuntering.

Sandy Martin: Thank you very much for your adjudication, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wholeheartedly concur.

None of us can imagine a society where none of the services that we currently pay taxes for operate. Those services would not be available if we did not have a taxation system that enables us to pay for them. The country would not be governable, and it would not be governed in any meaningful sense of the word. In fact, there would be complete anarchy.

When we vote, we are voting for a system of government that enables us to play a part in decisions about how much tax to levy, who and what to levy taxes on, what to spend those taxes on and how to make sure that no person in our society is ignored, and in which we all have a say on the taxes and expenditure that will have a direct impact on our lives.

We go to some lengths in this House to ensure that hon. Members from Scotland do not vote on decisions that affect only England and Wales, including how the taxes raised from people in England and Wales are spent on services in England and Wales. It is not relevant whether a Member for a Scottish seat happens to have been born in England. If an issue before us affects only Scotland or any of their constituents to make decisions that affect a polity that is inhabited by others and do not affect their own polity.

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman is raising quite an important point; there is a big difference between elected representatives and their constituents, but there will be roughly 3 million British expats watching this debate on their news channels across the world. Is he really saying that the Labour party is now telling all those British expats that they have made and are making no contribution to British life and to our British state?

Sandy Martin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but no, I am not saying any such thing.

Stephen Pound: The clue is in the word “private”.

Sandy Martin: First, I remind the hon. Gentleman that, as my hon. Friend says from a sedentary position, this is a private Member’s Bill. It is not about the Labour party position. Secondly, I am not in any way seeking to remove the right to vote from people who already have it. There is a sensible cut-off point, but, as I will say later, I do not believe that extending that cut-off point ad infinitum is necessarily a sensible way forward. Thirdly, as I will also come to, not all people who have lived in this country and contributed to the economy of this country have the means or, in many cases, the right to vote.

Paul Flynn: I have the great pleasure of sitting on two Select Committees with my hon. Friend, and I greatly enjoy his contributions, but may I urge him to limit his contribution today in the light of the important Bill that is coming next, so that we have a chance to deal with it?

Sandy Martin: I hear my hon. Friend, but unfortunately I do not agree—I think that whether or not this Bill proceeds is more important than whether we get to the next Bill. I am sorry.

When someone in this country votes to elect an MP who will share their views on taxes and services in this country, and who will seek to put into practice an overarching political philosophy with which they agree, the issue is not whether any particular tax is levied on a voter or whether an individual will benefit from any particular public service. It is whether the voter lives within the jurisdiction in which those decisions on tax and spending hold sway.

When I was unemployed and in receipt of benefits, I was legitimately able to vote for a political party that sought to levy a proper level of taxation on those who earned well above the average, on the understanding that I was living within the polity affected. I held perfectly legitimate views about how wealth should be distributed within that polity, and knew it was entirely possible that I would eventually become a taxpayer myself. I have not changed my views on benefit or taxation rates now that I earn significantly more in a single year—even after taxation, national insurance, pension contributions and so on—than I received in benefits in all the time that I claimed.

I believe that I ought to be paying considerably more in taxation—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) intervenes from a sedentary position, so I will take the liberty of answering him. I did not want to make this part of my speech, because I do not want to blow my own trumpet, but I have made a conscious and public decision to donate part of my income to good causes in Ipswich, simply because I do not believe that I am paying as much tax as I ought to pay. I am sure that other hon. Members do exactly the same.
Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that if he wants to pay more tax, he is perfectly entitled to. People can make arrangements with HMRC to pay more tax, and if he believes that he is not paying enough, he should by all means go ahead and pay more.

Sandy Martin: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I am in my own way already doing such a thing, although not via HMRC.

Stephen Pound: I am slightly concerned that we seem to be meandering down some sort of byway, rather than concentrating specifically on the Bill. As a passionate pro-European remainer, I wish that more people who live overseas had been able to vote, as I am sure they would have voted to do the sensible, right and logical thing and remain in the European Union. This may seem a philosophical point, although it is a practical one, but if someone lives in another country, should they not integrate within the polity of that country? By all means they should have 15 years to continue to vote for the motherland, but after that should they not become involved and concerned with the politics of the country in which they live? If they want to live in another country, should they not concentrate their vote there, rather than in the country in which they used to live at least 15 years ago?

Sandy Martin: My hon. Friend makes precisely the point that lies at the centre of my argument.

Stephen Pound: I am sorry; I did not mean to.

Sandy Martin: No, I apologise for not having made that point as clearly as I ought to have done, but that is the point I am seeking to make.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I sit on the same Select Committee as the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn). I detect that there may be some length to the remarks that the hon. Member for Ipswich is making, which will hold up our reaching the very important Bill promoted by his hon. Friend. What about skilled engineers and other skilled people who go to work abroad, leaving their families in this country? After 15 years of working abroad, does the hon. Gentleman think they should have no right to vote in this country if they come home only to visit? Should they be excluded? If people spread the skills and expertise of British workmanship, science and so on, should we remove their right to vote?

Sandy Martin: I think the right hon. Lady is mistaken. I hesitate to say that, because I know she has been a Member of the House for much longer than I, and she has a wealth of experience that I do not have. However, I believe that if somebody has family in this country and is resident here but travels abroad for the majority of the year, they remain a voter and resident in this country.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I am giving the example of where somebody might be a resident in another country because of a long-term contract. Effectively, the hon. Gentleman is saying that such a person would have the right removed after 15 years—if he is even happy to leave it at 15 years.

Sandy Martin: If somebody has entered into a contract that lasts for more than 15 years, involving them taking their family with them and living in another country for all that period, it is overwhelmingly likely that they are going to stay in that other country. Even if they were not going to stay in that other country, it would be quite difficult to make a meaningful distinction between moving to another country with the family for more than 15 years and emigration. I cannot see that there is a significant difference between the two. Clearly, British citizens who lived in another country for more than 15 years and, after 17 years, decided to move back to this country, would regain their voting rights once they had moved back to this country.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman's speech is confusing for the ex-pat community, because it is factually incorrect. For instance, in 2006, Spain signed a double taxation treaty with the UK, which means that residents can choose whether they pay their taxes to the UK or to Spain. A great number of ex-pats pay their tax to the UK, which makes the core of his argument null and void. I suggest that he allow the rest of the Members in the Chamber to discuss the merits of this very important Bill, which will enfranchise thousands, if not millions, of potential voters around the world.

Sandy Martin: I doubt there are 3 million British expatriates living in Spain who pay taxes to the British Treasury. The vast majority of people who would be affected by the Bill are not those who pay taxes to Britain while living in Spain. If there were a particular statutory instrument or a move to change the situation for people living in Spain, that would be a different matter.

Michelle Donelan: The hon. Gentleman is oversimplifying the issue. Those people might have pensions that are still being taxed at source in the UK. In fact, the majority are of pensionable age and do just that, so the argument is completely oversimplified. He is trying to base his argument on linking voting to taxation, which is impossible to do.

Sandy Martin: That is an interesting point and I am sure we could have a very long discussion about it across a table. I would be very interested to be educated in all those matters by the hon. Lady, but the Bill is itself extremely simple. It would extend the franchise to every British citizen everywhere in the world for ever. I think that that is fairly simplified and certainly not particularly nuanced towards the individual cases she is talking about.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend not find it a strange paradox that a party that has made registration in this country as difficult as it can make it, and which is against votes for 16 and 17-year-olds, is in favour of extending the franchise to everyone throughout the world?

Sandy Martin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is clearly an issue. There is a certain amount of double standards going on here. I will come to that issue later.
Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point, does my hon. Friend not think it rather strange that we still do not give the vote to EU citizens who have might have lived here for many, many years? The Conservative party seems to have no inclination to want to help people who live here, pay taxes here and contribute to this country to be able to vote. They should be our first priority, rather than trying to reach out to people who do not necessarily contribute to this country anymore.

Sandy Martin: There is a very important and powerful point here. As part of the European Union, we have had a very good arrangement with other EU countries in that, where people are voting in local elections, they vote in the local election where they live. Clearly, if someone lives in and votes in a particular borough or district, they are receiving services from that borough or district and are paying the council tax level that they have voted for. I think that arrangement works extremely well.

I have always found it a little odd that French or Italian citizens who have been living in this country for years should vote in French or Italian elections—for example, if they have been living here for 20 years and are clearly not taking part in French or Italian society. A sensible move would be towards people voting, at every level, for the polity in which they live.

A central part of what I am trying to get to is that when we vote, we are voting on things that affect us. When we vote as MPs in this place, we vote on things that affect our constituents. We should not be voting for things that do not affect our constituents, and in general, people should not be voting for things that will never affect them and will not affect the shape of the society in which they live.

I had legitimate views about how wealth should be distributed where I was living, even when I was unpaid, and I have not changed those views. As I was about to say before the various interventions were made, my view that I should be paying more taxation is not my party’s policy. I am being a bit more radical than my party leadership, because our taxation proposals in the manifesto that we put to British voters last year did not increase personal taxation for anyone on an income under £80,000. Be that as it may, I live in this polity. I voted for representatives in the past; I am now able to take my place and represent others who wish me to secure a well-regulated country that pays its taxes and provides its services, and which I am intimately and personally involved in.

The issue of 15 years is clearly crucial. If, as she intimated, the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) were to travel to another country for two years on sabbatical to show them, for instance, how it would be sensible for them to set up a bicameral parliamentary system, I am sure they would be extremely grateful for her expertise in that area, and as citizens of the world who want to see other countries being properly governed and regulated, I am sure that we would all be delighted that she had gone to show them that expertise. It would be entirely unreasonable, if a general election were to happen during those two years, for her not to be allowed to vote in that general election—unless she happened to have been elevated to the other House in the meantime. As long as she is a Member of this House, she, like the rest of us, will be able to vote in the next general election, whether she is in this country or abroad.

However, there is a point at which we have to ask whether people are living in this country. If someone is going abroad for more than 15 years and has family, I venture to suppose that they would want to take their immediate family with them. Anybody who decides that they are going to live permanently and completely abroad for 15 years and does not take their family with them obviously does not want to stay with their family anyway.

The idea that someone should be able to vote for a Government they think would be better for their family, although they do not want their family with them, is a bit bizarre. Clearly, if somebody lives abroad for more than 15 years and takes their family with them, the overwhelming assumption—the clear picture that gives people out there who are looking at what others are doing—is that they have decided to live in another country and that they have emigrated. This country has a proud history of emigration. People have emigrated to Canada, South America, South Africa and Australia, and they have helped to build thriving societies in all parts of the globe. All of them—or almost all—vote for the Governments of those countries, and rightly so.

When Canada, Australia and South Africa were dominions of this country, they voted for the Governments of those dominions, and rightly so. That was a sensible approach to representative and electoral rights, because they were voting for people who had power to make decisions about the lives that they were leading in those countries.

If this Bill had been passed in 1850, and we had given people who moved abroad the right to vote in the last constituency in which they had happened to be before emigrating for the rest of their lives, how could we have set up thriving and independent political bodies in those other parts of the world? How could we possibly have expected the people of this country, who were still living in this country, to be happy with circumstances in which every time there was a general election, all the people who had decided to move to Canada, Australia or South Africa, and their descendants, had more of an electoral say over how this country was governed than those who had stayed here and lived here?

If we gave the right to vote in British general elections to British citizens for the rest of their lives, irrespective of whether they were living in this country, that would presumably extend to their children, if their children were British citizens, although the children were not living in this country. If we did the same for the children of those children, where would it end? If Ireland had gone down that route, there might well have been far more people in New York voting in Irish general elections than in Ireland. The clear point is that if people are going to vote in an election, they need to be affected by that vote.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Is it not bizarre when, in other countries, the right to vote in elections is extended to generation after generation, and a large proportion of the electorate are outside the country where the election is taking place? When I was in Buenos Aires the other year, the campaign that was taking place on the streets concerned not an Argentinian but an Italian election. There were posters in the streets, and politicians were
flying over from Italy. It is bizarre that the Italians should have to start fighting elections in other countries to win them in Italy. Surely the Bill would undermine the concept of ruling Britain for the sake of the British, and ultimately there would be foreign influences in this Parliament. Would that not be a rather bizarre situation?

Sandy Martin: I entirely agree. In 2016, we had a vote—it did not go in exactly the direction that I would have supported, but it was a vote none the less—on taking back control of our own country. I do not think that when people were voting to take back control of their own country, they were voting to allow someone who had lived in the Caribbean, Australia or South Africa, and who intended to continue to live there, and who had been there for more than 15 years, to take back control of this country. I think that the majority of the population of this country would not believe that people who clearly would not be living in this country in the future should vote in elections in this country.

As I said earlier, if a British citizen moves abroad for two, three or four years and will then be coming back, it makes perfect sense to allow that person to vote in elections for a national Government who will affect their lives when they do come back. There has to be a cut-off point, and I note that the cut-off point is currently 15 years. That is not necessarily the cut-off point that I would choose, but given that all these arguments were gone through at the time when it was set, it would probably make sense to keep it that way.

There is a clear sense among those on the Conservative Benches that the Bill is designed to deal with an injustice, so let me now address the idea of injustice and, in particular, the idea of injustice in respect of pensions. This relates to part of what was said earlier by my hon. Friend sitting behind me, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes). If somebody has worked for the majority of their life in this country and has contributed through the national insurance system, it is perfectly legitimate and right that they should collect the same pension irrespective of whether they happen to be living in this country or another country.

We have a deeply unjust situation about the level of pensions people can collect across the world. Most people, apart from the people who live in those countries, do not realise how unjust the situation is. I am sure that Conservative Members will accuse me of simplifying or being simplistic about this, but it basically boils down to the fact that if people have retired to a Commonwealth country, the value of their pension diminishes away to almost nothing, whereas if they have retired to the United States or several other non-Commonwealth countries, their pension continues to be upgraded to match what it would have been if they had stayed in this country.

I will repeat that for those who did not hear it the first time or think I might have got it the wrong way around, because it is so counterintuitive and so clearly and manifestly unjust that it deserves repetition. If somebody moves to a Commonwealth country, the value of their pension diminishes away to nothing, whereas if they move to the US or some other non-Commonwealth countries, the value of the pension continues to grow alongside the value of pensions in this country. That is manifestly unjust; it is clearly discriminatory against other members of the Commonwealth. It is a bizarre situation, and I have no idea how it arose. It should have been dealt with years ago, and it is time that it is dealt with now. Why is that not the issue being addressed by this Bill? Why is this Bill addressing a manufactured injustice about voting rights, when it should be addressing an injustice about the pensions people ought to receive when they live in other countries?

Mike Gapes: May I say as honorary president of Labour International that Labour party members all over the world will be outraged that my hon. Friend is referring to this as a manufactured injustice? It is an injustice, and there might well be other injustices, many of which he is referring to, but it is wrong to say this is a manufactured issue.

Sandy Martin: I apologise if I have upset my hon. Friend, who has done a lot of work with Labour voters and potential Labour voters in other countries. Clearly, if people are living in other countries for limited periods, it makes perfect sense to enable those who are allowed to vote up to the time limit—at present, we have a 15-year cut-off—to vote for the party they want to vote for, and I honour and applaud the work my hon. Friend has done in encouraging those who are eligible to vote within that 15-year period to vote.

However, there must be a cut-off point. It does not make sense—it would not do so if there was a Labour or Conservative Government or a Labour or Conservative voter, and if they were living in Spain or South Africa—for us to assume that once somebody has moved abroad and it appears likely that they will live in another country for the rest of their lives, they should continue to vote in this country until the end of their life.

For example, a doctor who might have come to this country from Jamaica and has worked all her life and put an enormous amount of money into her pension who then decides on retiring to move back to be with her family in Jamaica will see the value of her pension dwindling into nothing, whereas someone who retires to Florida with a large sum of money of their own will see the value of their pension upgraded year on year in line with pensions in this country. If there were any injustice that needed to be addressed, this is surely one that should be addressed first.

We also need to consider the security of the poll. The Government want people to show security ID when they go to vote, and that makes a lot of sense, although I would like them to do more to ensure that everyone who goes to vote is enabled, encouraged and shown how to carry that ID. We want to ensure that everyone who is eligible to vote is able to do so. However, I fail to see how we can ensure that anyone living in another country does not register or vote more than once. Also, how can we ensure that they show their ID if they are not actually in this country? If we are to ensure security of the poll, we need to ensure that all the polling districts and electoral authorities are joined together on a central register, to ensure that there is no double voting by overseas voters.

Jo Stevens: On the security of the register and ensuring that everyone who is eligible is on the register and leaving aside the 15-year rule for overseas voters, there
will be an opportunity for the Government to support my Automatic Electoral Registration (No. 2) Bill when it comes before the House on 27 April. Does my hon. Friend agree that that might address some of his concerns?

Sandy Martin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to pursue all possible means of ensuring not only that the poll is safe but that everyone feels comfortable and able to use it. Her proposals have a great deal of merit.

Let us look at where these British citizens living abroad actually vote. Those still eligible to vote here have all lived abroad for less than 15 years, but if the Bill were to go through, they would be eligible to vote here for the rest of their lives. The City of London has 6,000 overseas electors; that is nearly 3% of the voters in that area. In Kensington and Chelsea, 2.5% of the voters live overseas, and in Oxford, the figure is 2.1%. In Westminster, it is 2.2%. Those figures represent a substantial number of people. For instance, there are 2,600 overseas voters registered in Westminster, and 3,300 in Camden, which is 2.37% of the electorate there. That is enough to make a difference on who is elected as Member of Parliament in those constituencies.

Let us look, however, at a constituency with fewer voters who live in other countries. Rotherham has 474 registered overseas voters, which is just 0.24% of the electorate in that constituency. I am not an expert on the demographics of Rotherham, but I believe I am right in saying that a large number of people from British Commonwealth nations have chosen to make their lives there, and I would be surprised if a large number of them had not decided to move back to the countries where their families came from or, in some cases, where they came from. However, those people are not registered as overseas voters. If we look at this, we can see that the people who choose to register as overseas voters tend to be people who are capable, professional, accomplished and, in many cases, encouraged to do so by the Conservative party.

I do not think the demographic of people living abroad is at all reflected by the people who are actually registered as overseas voters. Again, I applaud and encourage the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South to try to get people who have lived abroad for less than 15 years and who would be likely to vote Labour to register, but that does not alter the fact that the vast majority of people registered as overseas voters are not from Rotherham, Middlesbrough, Stoke-on-Trent or any of those other places with substantial new Commonwealth populations and where we would expect larger numbers of people to register to vote when they move back to the country in which the rest of their family live.

This is not a politically equivalent or politically balanced measure. It is not a measure that will treat voters, or potential voters, who might want to support one party similarly to voters who might want to vote for another party. I suggest that some people decide to move to another country precisely because taxation in this country is higher than elsewhere. If someone decides to move to Bermuda because they would pay less tax in Bermuda than they do in this country, the overwhelming likelihood is that they have a significant amount of money, otherwise they would not be able to afford to move to Bermuda in the first place.

Mark Tami: Certain countries, such as Portugal, give people the incentive of not paying tax for a period if they move a certain amount of their wealth over there.

Sandy Martin: My hon. Friend makes the point that we are not just talking about people moving to other countries. We are talking about significant amounts of wealth moving to other countries, too, and mostly moving to countries where taxation is paid at very low rates or, indeed, not at all.

Why should people who have decided to move to another country so that they do not pay taxes in this country, so that they do not support services in this country, have a say not only on tax and services in this country but on whether the Government of this country do something through our relationship with those countries and overseas territories to ensure that such people do pay their taxes? We have a situation where people who are deliberately avoiding paying taxes in this country—I think “avoiding” is parliamentary and the other one is non-parliamentary—are making decisions about who will represent them, who will govern our country and who will make decisions about how easy it is for them to avoid those taxes.

Conservative Members have also raised the issue of voting on behalf of our children. When people move abroad, their children often do not move with them—their adult children may well have families of their own, and they may well be making lives of their own in this country. It is a point, but not a very good one. If I had a child living in Scotland, I would not expect to be able to vote in a Scottish election in the constituency in which my child lives, as well as voting in my own constituency. I would not expect my vote to count towards the polity in which my child lives, and I see no good reason why people who have decided to live in another country should expect to be able to vote in elections in this country to reinforce the value of the votes of their adult children. When people vote, they should be voting for themselves, they should be voting for the services that they get, they should be voting for the taxes that they pay and they should be voting for the society in which they live—the society that levies those taxes and delivers those services.

I understand that the substance of this Bill, although it is a private Member’s Bill, was indicated by a promise made by the Conservative party in its 2017 general election manifesto. I surmise that there are people within the leadership of the Government who do not particularly want this to be a Government Bill, because it might be a little embarrassing to show that they are giving the vote to people who have chosen not to pay their taxes in this country, so they have decided that it should be a private Member’s Bill instead.

Quite a lot of other issues addressed in that manifesto last year have also not come up and show no indication of coming up in the next year or two, such as the dementia tax, the vote on foxhunting and reintroducing grammar schools. It is a little disingenuous of the Government to urge their Back Benchers to introduce Back-Bench Bills that they have previously promised in their manifesto but which they have now decided are too embarrassing to introduce themselves. I hope we do not get more of these embarrassment Bills. I have not looked through the list of all private Members’ Bills, so I do not know whether it contains one on bringing back foxhunting, on reintroducing grammar schools or on
introducing the dementia tax. I suspect it does not, but this would not be beyond the bounds of possibility. I hope that any such Bill would be dealt with by a House that has already shown and an electorate who have already shown this House that they did not have any truck with such proposals.

The Bill’s promoter said in summing up that he wanted British citizens who had made a decision to live abroad and had been living abroad for more than 15 years and their children to be able to continue to vote until “whenever it is reasonable to do so”. I suggest to him that there has to be a cut-off point and that “reasonable to do so” is, to a certain extent, a qualitative decision, whereas 15 years is a very reasonable amount of time. I cannot believe there are many places where it makes sense for somebody not to do something for more than 15 years and still have the same rights over that thing as the people who have been doing it constantly.

If I were to walk out of this House for 15 years and not come back, I would not expect to be able to speak in such a debate in the way that I have. I would dearly love to be able to go on for 15 years, but, unfortunately, I have pretty much run out of things to say.

In conclusion, I do not believe there is any justification for a Bill that encourages people to move to other countries, to stop paying taxes in this country and no longer to have any interest in whether or not services are delivered in this country and that yet allows them to vote for the Government who levy those taxes and deliver those services. Any reasonable person looking at it from that point of view—from the point of view of practicality and the argument of what a vote is for, which is to create a Government and a polity that govern taxes and services—would say, “Yes, it doesn’t make sense.” I can only guess that certain powerful and wealthy people desperately want the Government to give them the right to vote forever more—we should resist it.

1.33 pm  

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): This morning, we heard a dignified debate about organ donation and Bill that was named “Max’s Bill” This Bill could be “Shindler’s Bill”. I hope the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), having spoken for three quarters of an hour, will find the time to meet Harry Shindler. I am very proud to be allowed to call Harry Shindler a friend. He is 97 years old. He fought at Anzio. He returned to the United Kingdom, raised his family and worked here. He retired to Italy, where some of his family were living. He has deliberately avoided taking Italian citizenship, although he could most certainly have done so, because he regards himself, proudly and until his last breath, as British. He could have fraudulently registered in the United Kingdom—he has enough family and friends here to pull out an address and vote—but he is honest, and he is honestly British. He has fought tooth and nail, as the oldest living member of the Labour party, for his right to vote in Britain.

Just for the record, while Harry Shindler has been doing that, he has also spent his energy and his waking hours searching for the remains of British servicemen and women who fell in Italy, identifying them, and making sure that they are properly remembered and recorded. I do not think we could find anybody more British or with more right to vote than Harry Shindler. I hope that the hon. Member for Ipswich will have the courage to look Harry in the eye and tell him why he wants to deny that old man the right to vote again in Britain before he dies.

Harry will have heard that and, to take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), so will the millions of expat United Kingdom citizens living around the world who are not tax exiles. Many of them do pay taxes in the United Kingdom—many have taxed pensions and other taxed incomes in the United Kingdom—but after 15 years they are denied the right to vote. That is taxation without representation. Had the hon. Member for Ipswich read the Bill, he would have discovered that, notwithstanding the fact that the Bill will go to Committee—if we are allowed to get there—it already contains provisions to make sure that those who have not been resident in the United Kingdom cannot vote.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) left the Chamber some time ago. He mentioned bombed or demolished buildings and asked how an address might be used. The Bill is clear that the address has to be the last known address in the United Kingdom, wherever that was. The idea that the hon. Member for Ipswich put forward—that somehow that will load the balance of power and deliver Members of Parliament in relatively few clustered constituencies—is complete nonsense. Frankly, it is a discourtesy to the millions of people who live overseas and want the right to vote and to his own colleagues on the Opposition Benches—

[Sandy Martin rose—]

Sir Roger Gale: No. The hon. Gentleman spoke for far too long; I shall not give way an inch. The idea that he put forward is a discourtesy to many of his colleagues who support this cause, including the hon. Member for Ilford South, whose constituency he apparently could not remember.

Mike Gapes: South.

Sir Roger Gale: I beg the pardon of the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes)—I could not remember, either. We are all fallible.

The hon. Member for Ipswich referred to the fact that people who live in Commonwealth countries did not have their pensions uprated. I happen to be the chairman of the all-party group on frozen British pensions. I do not recall the hon. Gentleman attending any one of the meetings we have held to try to redress the injustice to which he referred—and yes, it is an injustice. Had he attended, he would have got his facts right, because there are Commonwealth countries—of which Jamaica is one, to pluck an example out of the sky—in which pensions are uprated. We want to see them uprated across the board. I mention that not to score points but to demonstrate how very wrong the hon. Gentleman was in virtually everything that he said.

I do not need to say any more. I want Harry Shindler, and the millions of expats like him who are proudly British, who take a keen interest in this country and regard it as their mother country, who have children and grandchildren living here, and who may well want to return to vote but wish to vote while they are overseas as well, to have that right. I do not believe that any part
of this House will find any favour, not only with those people but with their very many UK-resident family members, by disagreeing with that. I hope the House will remember that, if and when we get the chance to vote on the Bill, it is a good measure that redresses an injustice and its time has come. We should let it pass.

1.39 pm

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) on this Bill, which I wholeheartedly support. The core of it is not just about enfranchisement but about identity, and that, I am afraid, is the point that the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) has not entirely appreciated.

I am an example of someone who comes from a family that has been affected by the 15-year limit. My father went to work for the European Commission when I was one. We left this country at that point, as proud Brits, at a time when, if one wanted to change the world, one went to work for one of these great organisations—that is what one did. Over the years, we were lucky enough to be able to come back so that my father could proudly vote for me to become a Member of Parliament. However, for so many of his colleagues in Brussels and across the world, whom we have met as expats moving from country to country while my father pursued his role as an ambassador, they are every bit as British as the people in this Chamber. They have made incredible contributions as Brits across the world, and so many of them have lost their voice because they have lost their vote as a result of this outdated notion that we need to be sitting on a piece of land in order to love it. We know full well that that is not what it means to be British, and, at its heart, that is what this Bill is about.

Let me take a moment to give voice to some of my electors and constituents who are abroad, but also to a few who are about to not be abroad and who, hopefully, will once again become electors in Oxford West and Abingdon, which, incidentally, is probably one of the constituencies with tiny majorities that the hon. Member for Ipswich was talking about where these people do make a difference—and boy, were they happy to be able to do so.

**Ruth in Spain** says:

“I have lived in Spain for 14 years and so am lucky enough to still (just!) be entitled to vote in the UK.”

Here she makes an important point, and highlights where I think this Bill could have gone further. I understand—I am happy to accept an intervention if I am wrong—that this Bill would not extend the franchise to referendums. It is clear that many have registered to vote from abroad as a result of the Brexit turmoil. Every single email that I have had from constituents has been about this point. I would be interested to know from the Minister today whether that is part of the plan.

**Chris Skidmore:** Having briefly been a Minister for the constitution with responsibility for the franchise, I would like to enlighten the hon. Lady. When it comes to referendums, the franchise is set individually by a referendum Act. Each referendum is described and detailed by its own separate piece of legislation. Even if my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) wanted to add this to his Bill, he would not be able to because referendums are discretely contained in how they define the franchise, which is why the franchise was slightly different for the Scottish referendum in 2014.

**Layla Moran:** I am very grateful for that intervention. I was not aware of that. I would also have presumed that, had they not been on the register at all, we certainly could not have included them. At least this perhaps gives us the constitutional option.

**Mike Gapes:** For the hon. Lady’s information, some of us tried to extend the franchise for the European referendum to the local government referendum, but we were defeated. Unfortunately, it was therefore simply based on those eligible to vote in a general election.

**Layla Moran:** I am grateful for that intervention. As the hon. Gentleman is probably aware, the Liberal Democrats would have supported that, because we believe that European citizens, as this affected them, should have had a say in that referendum.

**Ruth in Spain** goes on to say:

“Recent events obviously highlighted the injustice of the current situation, in that many were denied a vote in the EU referendum—and also last year’s general election (an election largely based around Brexit)—the outcome having life-changing ramifications for British citizens who had chosen to move from one part of the EU to another on the basis that their rights to freedom of movement and all that this entailed were guaranteed.”

That was the basis of so many emails, but it is not just that.

Julian, who is a foreign correspondent, has lived in many countries as a Brit, and the soft power mentioned by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire is very clear in his career. Julian contacted me some months ago, saying:

“Expatriates are not all pensioners sipping cocktails on the Costa del Sol. Many of them are useful contributors to the British economy and to the image of Britain abroad. Only this month, for example, a French food magazine chose a rural bistro in the Auvergne owned and run by a British chef as its cafe of the year. Britons abroad are often popular and useful members of their adopted communities.”

I agree that expatriates should be allowed to vote in some elections in their current countries of residence, just as it is right for us to continue to allow EU citizens to vote in local elections here.

We live in an increasingly globalised world. It is ridiculous to suggest that some families even have a choice to move back. House prices in some parts of the UK are expensive not just for the UK, but compared with house prices across the world. Ian in Canada says:

“Sadly, I’m retraining as an MD after a career as a neuroscientist, and have been out of the UK since 2004. I say ‘sadly’, because as you’ll be aware, that means the period under which I’m able to cast votes in UK elections is drawing to a close under the current 15 year rule… I may not have been able to afford to continue living in the UK on a post-doctoral scientist’s salary”—

that is why he had to move—

“But I haven’t given up on the old country yet, and would like to continue trying to shape things for the better.”

**Sandy Martin:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Layla Moran:** Very briefly and only once.
Sandy Martin: Does the hon. Lady accept that, although the case she mentions is clearly of somebody who has contributed immensely—not only to this country, but to the world—it must be quite difficult for her to be able to make decisions in Oxford West and Abingdon that affect his life in Canada?

Layla Moran: I do not quite understand. If Ian wanted to affect his life in Canada, he would be able to find ways of doing so there. I also think he would very much be able to affect some decisions made at this level of politics. I do not think that this provision should necessarily be extended to local elections and issues, such as bin collections in Oxford West and Abingdon. However, the recent general elections have been about major issues such as the direction of this country and the flavour that this country puts out to the rest of the world. It is entirely right that people who feel British, are British and are born into a British family have the right to vote on such matters.

I am half Palestinian and I regret that I am not at all able to engage with the country in which my mother grew up—she was actually born in Tripoli, but grew up in Jerusalem. I very keenly feel that just because I have never lived in Palestine does not make me any less Palestinian. Equally, those who have spent a lot of their life abroad have a lot to say about being British. Being British is more than just being on this land. It is loving this land and feeling that we are from this land.

I will soon draw my remarks to a close because I am keen to hear the next Bill, of which I am an sponsor. I just want to ask why we have not really considered having a constituency of overseas electors in the way that France does. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether the Government will look into that. One reason that people do not register to vote from abroad is that it is incredibly bureaucratic and hard, and they might well live in countries where the postal system does not work very well. I therefore wholeheartedly agree with finding a way to make it much easier. As the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) mentioned, it would be an excellent idea to give people the ability to return their vote to the embassy or the consulate, rather than having to get it back to the local authority.

It is an extraordinary privilege to be British. As a new Member of Parliament, it strikes me how much Members across the House all love this country. This Bill demonstrates—as is also shown by the numerous constituents who I am sure have contacted us all from abroad—that people do not have to be on this land to love it. The Liberal Democrats and I wholeheartedly back this Bill. I sincerely hope that the House votes in favour of it today.

1.49 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am grateful to have caught your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. I start by paying a sincere tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) for bringing forward the Bill. He did not say it, but, contrary to what the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) insinuated, it was entirely his wish to bring it forward, because he, like me and my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), believes that it is the right thing to do. This should not be considered a political issue. In the centenary of Emmeline Pankhurst’s campaign to get women the vote in this country, fought often in difficult and violent circumstances, it is a disgrace for certain Labour Members to try to deny the vote to women who have lived overseas for longer than 15 years.

Jo Stevens: What makes a 16-year-old woman in this country any less valuable than a 70-year-old woman living in Spain who is a British national? That woman has a vote, but the 16-year-old woman does not.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I entirely respect the sincerity with which the hon. Lady holds the view that 16-year-olds should have the vote. It is a legitimate debate, but it has nothing to do with the Bill. If she wishes to introduce a private Member’s Bill, a ten-minute rule Bill or a Bill through any other procedure, she is more than able to do so and speak in support of it, but that has nothing to do with this Bill.

One or two falsehoods have been peddled in this debate. It has been said several times that children of those living overseas for more than 15 years will be eligible to vote. I have read the Bill and can see nothing in it that would make those children eligible to vote. Indeed, the Bill is very specific as to the qualifications somebody would have to meet to be eligible.

I gave the House some figures in a debate in 2012. At that time, according to the Institute for Public Policy Research, 5.6 million British citizens were living abroad, but the shocking truth was that although as of December 2011 about 4.4 million were of voting age, only about 23,000 had registered to vote. I am delighted to say that that number had increased to a huge 285,000 by the time of the 2017 general election—as the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) indicated, it might have had something to do with the EU referendum. If we believe that British citizens have the right to vote for up to 15 years, it must be right to remove the arbitrary limit whereby the day after 15 years they have no right to vote. It is right on every ground, especially that of extending the franchise, that we do that.

Totally contrary to what the hon. Member for Ipswich said in his overly long remarks, most overseas citizens have a real interest in how this country is governed. They watch BBC World, they listen to the BBC World Service, and they often get British newspapers in the countries in which they reside.

Sandy Martin: Does the hon. Lady accept that, although the case she mentions is clearly of somebody who has contributed immensely—not only to this country, but to the world—it must be quite difficult for her to be able to make decisions in Oxford West and Abingdon that affect his life in Canada?

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vote for how those services are provided. How can that be correct? His whole argument was totally fallacious. Some 1.8 million students do not pay council tax, but nobody would ever suggest that they should be denied the vote on the grounds that they do not pay council tax. That would be a nonsensical argument.

Moving on from the hon. Gentleman, let us look at some international comparisons. According to my research, the only countries that have stricter rules on overseas voting are Ireland, Greece and Malta: paragons, I would say, of democratic values—or not. The countries that have real democratic values—the US, France, Japan, South Africa, Belgium, the Czech Republic and Italy—all have no limits on when their citizens living overseas can vote. As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon said, with the advent of Brexit and the UK leaving the European Union, it is surely more imperative than ever that we embrace all our citizens living overseas, wherever they are, but particularly within the European Union, so that they feel part of this country, and surely the way to do that is to give them the vote.

I suggest to the hon. Member for Ipswich and the House that the expat vote has never been more important. It is our combined duty to further consolidate the British influence over those citizens and make them feel part of the British family. Despite what the hon. Gentleman says, they are soft power for this country—ambassadors for this country around the world. They gain this country a lot of influence, whether it be cultural, diplomatic, or purely in terms of imports, exports and inward investment into this country.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire gets this Bill through today. It is absolutely the right thing to do, and it is not a political issue. A number of us have campaigned very hard on it for a number of years. I hope that Labour Members will find it in their hearts, just as they wanted women to get the vote and just as they want votes at 16, to give our expats the same rights so that they can vote in our elections and have a say on how politics in this country is run.

1.56 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I will try to be brief, because I want this Bill to get through.

I believe that there is an injustice in the arbitrary 15-year rule, but there are also many other injustices in the way many British citizens living overseas are treated. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) was right to highlight some of them. What is not right, however, is whataboutery and the best being the enemy of the good. What is not right is using false hares and arguments in order to discredit this Bill and imply that all the people supporting it are against, for example, votes at 16. I voted for the private Member’s Bill that proposed that, and it will come. Within our parliamentary procedure, we cannot have an all-encompassing electoral reform Bill. Our only opportunity to deal with this injustice is to support the Second Reading of this Bill to allow it to make progress. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) has done an excellent job in bringing it forward.

For some months, I have been pressing the Government, on behalf of Labour International and in response to communications I have had with Harry Shindler, who has already been mentioned, on why they were not bringing forward the commitment they made in their manifesto. When I asked questions about that last October, I was referred to answers given in September to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who had also been raising this issue from the Labour Benches. There is a bipartisan interest—in fact, a cross-Parliament, all-party interest—in these matters. All of us, even those who have only a few constituents who have gone to live in other countries, will have had communications about them from people in Spain, France, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada or wherever.

There are international organisations within the political parties that represent our party members living abroad. I have the honour of being the honorary president of Labour International, and I want to convey a few words from an email from Lorraine Hardy. She was not registered to vote in Oxford or Westminster, but was a Labour party activist in Leeds before she went to live in Alicante with her husband many years ago. She says:

“Votes for Life’ will be even more important post Brexit, as we will have no opportunity to vote for a national representative in the UK nor in our country of residence as there will no longer be an option to vote for an MEP.”

Frankly, it is an outrage that a large number of British people whose future in Europe was affected by the referendum were not able to vote in that referendum because they had been living abroad in a European Union country for more than 15 years. That democratic outrage was not manufactured; it was a fact. This is an opportunity to make sure that we remedy that outrage and take a small step towards allowing those people to express their views at the next general election on whether their parliamentary representatives were right to damage their position in Europe. I think that many of them might have some things to say about that. I will not get into that, but the view that this is one-sided is completely and utterly wrong. None of us knows what the views are of people living in other countries who have not expressed positions and are not registered to vote. That idea is just made up and manufactured.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Gapes: I will take one intervention and then I will conclude, because I want this debate to end.

Sir Oliver Heald: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the opinions of people in a country such as Canada or America could inform our political discourse? Those countries have service animal protection—something I am calling for—and people there could inform our debate, so that we can see how well it works there.

Mike Gapes: Given that we have Skype, WhatsApp, Facebook and all the other means of communication, those people already inform the debate in many ways.

There is a democratic principle here. We should recognise what the Labour International co-ordinating committee said in the motion that it passed, which it asked me to bring to the attention of the House:

“Many of the concerns about voting are related to fears and anger about the loss of rights normally associated with citizenship such as pensions, health care and the right to family life. This should be dealt with by the government allocating these issues to...a...minister and by establishing a forum for the concerns of overseas UK citizens.”
Reference has been made to France. There are Senators in the French system who represent overseas French territories, and there are Members of the Assemblée Nationale who represent French citizens living in other countries in Europe. We need to address that issue as part of the wider question of the reform of our second Chamber, but that is not for today. Today is to remedy problems, to right an injustice and to say to British people, wherever they are in the world: you have equal rights in our democracy.

The changes have the Government’s support and are part of a wider ambition to strengthen our democracy by ensuring that every voice within it can be heard. Under existing laws, British expats are estimated to have among the lowest levels of voter registration of any group—only about 20% of eligible expats registered to vote for the June 2017 general election. We think that figure is too low, and we hope that more people will be encouraged to register by our proceedings today.

We have already introduced online electoral registration, which, contrary to some negative points raised during the debate, makes it easier for people overseas—and indeed in this country—to register to vote. We are interested in making it easier for people to vote and encouraging them to do so. Participation in our democracy is a fundamental part of being British, no matter how far someone has travelled from the UK. Since the House last discussed this topic it has become easier for someone to stay in touch with their home country, whether through cheap flights, the internet, or the soft power of British citizenship. Soft power is important to this country, and we should be welcoming to our citizens around the world. Globalisation has led to a broad section of British citizens living around the world, and despite settling in all corners of the globe, overseas electors make a contribution to British society.

The issue of extending voting rights for overseas electors is important and must be considered properly. There has been a significant rise in the number of overseas electors registered to vote, and that number now stands at a record high of 285,000. As has been said, this is the centenary of the start of suffrage for women and many working-class men. That has encouraged many Members across the House to reflect on that journey towards equal and wider suffrage.

The extension of overseas voting rights has come a long way since 1985, when British citizens living overseas in the UK were unable to register to vote in any elections. The Representation of the People Act 1985 introduced new provisions to allow British citizens living overseas to qualify as electors in the constituency where they were last registered to vote before moving, with a time limit in 1985 of just five years. In 1989, that was extended to 20 years before being reduced again to 15 years in 2002. In the 2015 and 2017 general elections, the Conservative party made a manifesto commitment to abolish the 15-year rule and allow British citizens a “vote for life” in parliamentary elections.

I am proud to do my small part on behalf of the Government to welcome the Bill and give it our support. It will allow campaigners who feel an abrupt sense of injustice when they are disenfranchised after 15 years to continue to contribute, not only in their interests, as represented by the Government of the country that they love—that point was put well by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran)—but to help promote Britain, this great country, around the world.

Jo Stevens: I do not understand why, if it was in the Conservative party manifesto to introduce this legislation, we are here today debating a private Member’s Bill. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government could have taken the opportunity to have an all-encompassing electoral reform Bill to include automatic voter registration, votes at 16 and online voting, as well as extending the lifetime of expat voting?
Cat Smith: I fully support my hon. Friend’s private Member’s Bill. I hope that Members across the House who want to see a more inclusive democracy where every eligible voter can vote at the election will continue to support her Bill. She raises an interesting point about why this matter is before us on a Friday as a private Member’s Bill. It is deeply concerning that this measure has been put into a private Member’s Bill, introduced by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire, that is being used to push Government business.

Private Members’ Bills serve an important function in our parliamentary process by enabling Back-Bench Members of Parliament, rather than the Government of the day, to initiate legislation. Indeed, private Members’ Bills have made significant changes to the law over the years—for example, the Murder (Abolition of the Death Penalty) Act 1965 and the Abortion Act 1967. However, with limited time available for consideration of private Members’ Bills, we cannot allow the Government to disrespect an important part of the parliamentary process and an important power that our Back Benchers have.

The Opposition are committed to building a political franchise that works for the many, not the few. However, it is also vital that we maintain the integrity of the electoral process. Unfortunately, it has been undermined by the Government, who have pushed local authority election teams to the absolute limit, damaging their ability to deliver elections effectively. The introduction of individual electoral registration added significant cost pressures by making it more expensive to compile the register. Election administrators have criticised the Government for massively underestimating the scale of the task at hand.

Mark Tami: My hon. Friend is making an important case on registration. Experience, particularly that from Northern Ireland, has shown that it is poorer areas where registration drops by the largest amount.

Cat Smith: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. That is the context of local government funding being reduced significantly over the years, which has forced local authorities to review their electoral services. That has led to significant reductions in core service funding and staffing levels, with a growing number of skilled professionals leaving local authority elections teams.

The impact of austerity was recently evidenced by the University of East Anglia, which found that 43% of local authorities experienced real-terms funding cuts to their budget for running elections from 2010-11 to 2015-16. According to survey responses from 254 local electoral authorities administering the EU referendum, only a quarter of electoral officials said they had enough funding to support their work on the electoral register.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): The Electoral Commission’s report on the 2017 general election warns of risks to the administration of well-run elections, which are becoming increasingly apparent due to reduced resources and a growing number of skilled professionals leaving local authority elections teams. Does my hon. Friend agree that cuts to local government will affect this service?

Cat Smith: The report that my hon. Friend raises is very worrying and should be of concern to Members across the House. When 43% of local authorities agree that they do not have sufficient funds to administer a poll, we should all be worried about the integrity of our electoral system. The Government fail to understand that cuts to public services can have devastating consequences.

Last year, the Electoral Commission report on the general election warned of “wider risks to the administration of well-run elections,” which it stated were “becoming increasingly apparent.” Problems in some places have caused some voters to receive an inadequate service. That was evidenced most recently in Newcastle-under-Lyme, where two council officials were suspended after almost 1,500 people were unable to vote in last year’s general election.

Mark Tami: It has been estimated that probably more than 7 million people in this country are not registered to vote. Should we not be concentrating on them and making sure that they are on the register, rather than what we are talking about today—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman has intervened several times. He must talk about the Bill, not about other matters.

Cat Smith: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend’s intervention was particularly about the capacity of local elections offices. Were the Bill to be successful, the impact on local elections offices in councils up and down the country would be huge, because the process of registering an overseas elector can take around two hours. If those offices were to see a huge increase in the number of overseas electors registering at a time when local councils have had huge funding cuts, the pressure would be absolutely huge.

There was further evidence in June about how under-resourced election staff are. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly) described the issues on polling day as “a shambles”. Significant issues also occurred in Plymouth, with hundreds of voters unable to cast their votes in the June general election. An independent investigation found that 35,000 postal vote holders had received two polling cards—a postal vote polling card and a polling station card. In addition, 331 people who received a polling card that was issued on 5 May were removed from the register after that point.

These failings clearly illustrate that more action must be taken now to deal with the increasing challenges that returning officers face in delivering elections effectively. Those concerns have been raised on multiple occasions by the Association of Electoral Administrators, which has called on the Government for a “full and thorough review of the funding of the delivery of electoral services...as a matter of urgency”.

Not only is that impacting on voters, but it might also be having a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of electoral administrators and the public servants who work in local elections offices. Following the 2017 general election, the Association of Electoral Administrators wrote that “we have collectively been concerned for the health and well-being of...our members”.

As a result, the AEA contracted the Hospital and Medical Care Association to provide members with
free-of-charge access to confidential counselling services. That is not an indication of healthy elections offices up and down the country.

In the context of austerity, we cannot allow the Government to dismantle our electoral system any further. The existing provision of checking registration against electoral registration officer records within 15 years is already a challenging and resource-intensive process. Some applications contain vague or incorrect previous addresses, which can cause problems in checking the register—so much so that the Association of Electoral Administrators has estimated that it takes roughly two hours to register one overseas elector. Because overseas electors fall off the register after 12 months, the vast majority of registration applications occur immediately ahead of a general election, when the pressure on electoral administrators is at its most intense.

Abolishing the 15-year rule, and therefore presumably increasing the number of British citizens overseas who can register to vote, would completely overstretch electoral administrators, who are already being pushed to the limit. In addition, the requirement to keep copies of previous revisions of registers for more than 15 years, whether in data or in paper format, will have a resource implication in the form of increased ICT server capacity or physical storage area.

In the light of those concerns—

Paul Flynn: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As we appear to have passed the point at which it would have been possible to consider the next Bill, I want the House to know that there will be a public demonstration outside in which democracy will work, and we will have a debate on the crucial effects of the present law on young children and those in serious health difficulties, including a young boy who is suffering, and whose parents are suffering, in a terrible way. What has happened here today has been a filibuster organised by one party, and I am ashamed to say that I am a member of that party—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I allowed the hon. Gentleman to make a point of order about his Bill—although he knows that it was not a point of order—because I appreciated that he had a point to make, and I allowed him to make it. However, I will not take from him criticism of the Chair through the use of the word “filibuster”.

Cat Smith: Let me return to the Bill. I want to ask the Government three questions. Have they any indication of how many of the estimated 5 million Britons living abroad would apply to be overseas electors in the run-up to a UK parliamentary election or national referendum if the 15-year rule were removed? How do they intend to fund EROs for the additional costs incurred by these proposals? What steps will they take to ensure that election teams have the resources and the capacity to manage the increased volume of electors?

The devil is also in the detail, which the Government have failed to provide. According to the Bill, an overseas voter will qualify as a resident if

“the person has at some time in the past been entered in an electoral register in respect of an address at a place that is situated within the constituency”. However, many questions remain unanswered.

If an overseas elector was registered at a previous address but then moved to a different address before leaving the UK where they did not register, at which address should they register to vote? As time goes by, potentially over several decades, it could be very difficult for EROs to check previous revisions of registers owing to ever-changing localities. Problems include local government reorganisation, polling district and ward boundary reviews, the demolition or redevelopment of properties, street renaming, house renumbering, and limited availability of local authority records. Can we seriously expect someone who has not lived in this country for 40 years to remember the exact date on which they were last registered to vote, and the precise address at which they lived? I think not.

I also question whether the current deadline to apply to register as an overseas elector and make absent voting arrangements is sufficient, in the context of abolition of the 15-year rule. The Association of Electoral Administrators has urged the Government to consider bringing forward the voter registration deadline for overseas electors to allow sufficient time to process and check previous revisions of registers. What steps will the Government take to address those concerns?

Not only is the likelihood of error extremely high, but we are leaving our democracy wide open to potential fraudulent activity. In response to the Cabinet Office policy statement about overseas voters, the Association of Electoral Administrators warned that scrapping the 15-year rule would increase the potential for electoral fraud. Under the Government’s proposals, applicants who cannot provide a national insurance number or UK passport could have their identity verified by another registered overseas elector using an attestation. That would be a signed written statement from another British citizen who was registered to vote in the UK. Can we honestly expect this to be sufficient security to prevent fraudulent applications? When the attester as well as the applicant live abroad, what is the likelihood of a false declaration resulting in prosecution proceedings? My guess is, very low.

There is also no way of checking whether an overseas voter is living at the stated address abroad. Overseas voters who owned and lived in more than one home could register more than once and we would have no way of knowing whether people were registered multiple times.

Mark Tami: If there was a concern, would there be people in Spain or whatever country who would go to see whether those addresses existed?

Cat Smith: Given the overstretched nature of elections offices up and down the country, I suspect there would not be the capacity for such a check. Given that the Government are this May planning to trial requiring ID at polling stations, it seems that the requirements to prove the identity of an elector living in the UK are far greater than—

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: claimed to move the closure

(Standing Order No. 36)

Question put.
A Division was called; Dame Cheryl Gillan and Geoffrey Clifton-Brown were appointed Tellers for the Ayes, but no Members being appointed Tellers for the Noes, the Deputy Speaker declared that the Ayes had it.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I will, unusually, delay for a moment to see whether the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), who was in the Chamber until just a few minutes ago, is in the vicinity. I make it clear to the House that I am not creating a precedent in so doing, but I am aware that the hon. Gentleman was in a wheelchair and it might therefore take him a little longer to reach the Chamber.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I ask your advice? It is obvious that there was an enormous weight of opinion in favour of the Bill that has just gone through on Second Reading, but some Members—particularly those on the other side—sought to shout against the Bill but then failed to put in Tellers. Will you advise me on whether that is good practice in this House? Surely, when a body of people shouts no, Tellers would normally be put in position by those Members shouting no.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I understand the point that the right hon. Lady makes, but it is perfectly proper for those who oppose a Bill not to put in tellers and not to see the matter through to a Division. It is not a question of whether that is bad or good practice; the practice is in order, and that is my consideration.

Business without Debate

LEGALISATION OF CANNABIS (MEDICINAL PURPOSES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March.

TYRES (BUSES AND COACHES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

VOTER REGISTRATION (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March.

KEW GARDENS (LEASES) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March.

PETITION

Raunds Library

2.31 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I am presenting this petition on the future of Raunds library on behalf of the pupils of St Peter's School in Raunds, who are very concerned that the library might close. The petition declares that the pupils of St Peter's School want Raunds library to remain open. A similar petition—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Hon. Members who are not listening to the petition should go outside to chat. This is not fair to Mr Pursglove.

Tom Pursglove: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the pupils of St Peter's School will be watching that discipline with interest. You are absolutely right to make that point.

A similar petition has received 241 signatures, and it has been superbly organised by the pupils of the school, including Mason and Alex Bandy.

The petition states: The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that Raunds Library should remain open. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compel Northamptonshire County Council to ensure that Raunds Library remains open. And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002114]
Eider Duck: Marine Conservation Zones

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

2.35 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): After all that excitement, I hope now to take the House in a slightly different direction.

We might think of St Francis of Assisi as the original saintly animal conservationist but, although St Francis preached to the birds, Northumberland’s own St Cuthbert is popularly believed to have taken steps way back in the 8th century to ensure that some of Northumberland’s eider duck population enjoyed his personal protection.

There are a number of animal stories attached to St Cuthbert. A famous episode in Bede’s “Life of St Cuthbert” involved Cuthbert standing neck-deep in the sea and praying, after which two otters came and dried his feet with their fur. The animals were rewarded with a blessing and went on their way.

Perhaps the animal most associated with St Cuthbert today is the eider duck, or Cuddy duck—Cuddy being a shortened form of Cuthbert. The first we hear of their association with Cuthbert is in the 12th century, some 500 years after his death. The monks had a small cell and chapel on the island of Inner Farne, one of the beautiful Farne islands in my constituency that are now visited by hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. The monks shared this island home with a large nesting population of eider ducks. Cuthbert is said to have tamed the ducks so well that they would nest everywhere, even next to the chapel altar, without fear.

Cuthbert also placed the ducks under his protective grace, so that no one should eat or even disturb them. Every spring, on the many Farne islands and on Coquet island, all in my constituency, Mrs Eider and her babies can be found snuggled into a shallow hole in the ground, safe from predators thanks to island life and the careful and diligent work of the RSPB and the National Trust rangers who look after the island reserves.

The ducks cannot have remained entirely undisturbed by the monks, as we note the appearance in inventories made of Cuthbert’s shrine at Durham of cushions made of “Cuthbert doun”—downy feathers from St Cuthbert’s eider ducks on Farne. Perhaps the sacred purpose of the plucked feathers excused the necessary disturbance to the ducks. Certainly, other monks who had eaten or hassled Farne’s eiders were struck down by Cuthbert’s curse, with one even dying after mocking the saint’s protection.

So it is that the association with place is very strong and that I have the great privilege of being the eider duck’s advocate today. In St Cuthbert’s time, only the Cuddy ducks of Inner Farne were protected; the eider ducks on the other islands were not protected. Today, in modern protection terms, many other species of our spectacular island birdlife are protected but not the eider duck.

The creation in recent years of 50 marine conservation zones by this Government, with more planned, would no doubt receive the approval of St Cuthbert, as the delineated zones along my constituency’s unique coastline provide protection for wildlife and our marine environment. The MCZs have been created to protect important marine wildlife and their habitats, and they form part of what is now popularly known as the “blue belt.”

Our spectacular Northumberland coast is teeming with wildlife, from seabirds as rare as the roseate tern to my personal favourite, the delightful and slightly ungainly puffin—she flies like a fast jet—to porpoises, grey seals, dolphins and even the occasional whale. And that is just what can be glimpsed from above the water. Below the surface, Northumberland’s blue belt is a bustling city of crustaceans and molluscs, alongside an extensive and healthy fish population.

It is wonderful that the creation of MCZs means that our rich and diverse sea life will now be further protected from the effects of dredging and trawling, so that many more future generations can enjoy, explore and learn about nature’s world under the waves. But St Cuthbert would be disappointed to discover that within the Coquet to St Mary’s MCZ lies the uninhabited—by humans, at least—Coquet island, which does not yet include the eider duck among its protected species.

The common eider is a large sea-duck that is distributed over the northern coasts of Europe, North America and all the way to eastern Siberia. It breeds in Arctic and some northern temperate regions, but winters farther south, in temperate zones, when it can form large flocks on coastal waters. Our Cuddy duck can fly at speeds of up to 70 mph. The eider’s nest is built close to the sea and is lined with eiderdown, plucked from the female’s breast. This soft and warm lining has long been harvested for filling pillows and quilts. Although eiderdown pillows or quilts are now a rarity, eiderdown harvesting continues and is sustainable, when it is done after the ducklings leave the nest with no harm to the birds.

The common eider is both the largest of the four eider species and the largest duck found in Europe and in North America. The male is unmistakable, with his black and white plumage and green nape. The female is a brown bird, but can still be readily distinguished from all ducks. This species divies for crustaceans and molluscs, with mussels being a favourite food. The eider will eat mussels by swallowing them whole; the shells are then crushed in the gizzard and excreted. When eating a crab, the eider will remove all its claws and legs, and then eat the body in a similar fashion.

Eiders are colonial breeders. They nest on coastal islands in colonies ranging in size from as little as 100 to up to 10,000 in some parts of the world. Female eiders frequently exhibit a high degree of natal philopatry, returning to breed on the same island where they were hatched. This can lead to a high degree of relatedness between individuals nesting on the same island, so I feel that those eider ducks from Coquet island and from the Farne are very much part of our family. Breeding eider fly from Coquet island and across the sea to use the mudflats adjacent to the Coquet estuary as a feeding ground for their young. Eider is a true sea-duck and is rarely found away from coasts. Throughout the year, breeding eider from Coquet feed in the intertidal zone of the Northumberland Shore SSSI—site of special scientific interest—and later in the year non-breeding eider also migrate here to feed during the winter months.

Although sea-bird and sea-duck colonies benefit from protection provided by the SSSI, these sites provide protection only on land. The site was designated in 1980 for about 500 nests, but by 2015 estimates of this
number had dropped to about 300. The site is now being managed to address this long-term decline. The area is also an important winter feeding area for migrating eider from across Europe. Eider is a species listed as “near threatened” globally and “vulnerable” in Europe by the International Union for Conservation of Nature; a vulnerable species is one that has been categorised by the IUCN as likely to become endangered unless the circumstances that are threatening its survival and reproduction improve. These declines are thought to be driven by a range of threats, including the overharvesting of aquatic resources, pollution, disturbance and hunting.

In Britain, eider are currently classified as “amber” on the birds of conservation concern in the United Kingdom list. Disturbance is the primary threat to our eider; it results in a loss of access to feeding areas and increased predation at breeding grounds. There are several studies considering the common eider in relation to human disturbances. The study of the effects of human disturbance at breeding sites found that when disturbed, some or all ducklings and sometimes the mother dived, and the breeding colony was temporarily dispersed. During this disturbance, attacks by predators such as greater black-backed gulls and herring gulls increased. The study found that predation of chicks by gull attacks was more than 200 times higher on disturbed breeding colonies than on undisturbed ones, and this resulted in significantly lower numbers of chicks fledging each year.

The excellent Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 seeks to address management issues, such as disturbance, by creating marine conservation zones—MCZs. MCZs can be used to protect biodiversity in UK seas and are intended to allow a wide spectrum of protection. They form a key part of a wider suite of management measures including marine planning, ecosystem objectives, licensing and fisheries management. However, the designation of protected areas is the best means of securing the necessary commitment from marine managers and sea users to ensure that activities can be restricted, where necessary, to protect biodiversity.

Although the area used by eider around Coquet island and the Northumbria coast overlaps with an existing European marine site—EMS—eider do not receive any legal protection from the existing designation within the new MCZ. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has asked the Government to add the eider duck to the Coquet to St Mary’s MCZ list of protected species. Our friendly Cuddies reside within this zone all year round, yet are not covered by the existing legislation. Our Northumberland coast’s resident eider populations have continued to decline steadily over the last few decades, so protection of their sea-based feeding and wintering habitats is essential.

Across Europe, hunting, pollution and land disturbance means that other colonies are also in decline. The Coquet island colony is therefore all the more in need of protection. In so doing, the Minister would be allowing protection and management for these special birds to be put into place. Adding eider to the existing Coquet to St. Mary’s MCZ would enable proactive management to reduce and manage the threat of disturbance. The management requirements would need to carry out formal disturbance monitoring, management and enforcement, where necessary, such as by imposing speed restrictions or limiting boat traffic in sensitive areas.

The publication of codes of conduct increases public awareness of species of interest in an area, which may increase local tourism with benefits to the economy, so the proposals should include education and awareness of conduct in the MCZ.

Are the Government willing to include eider ducks in the Coquet to St Mary’s MCZ? Will they go further and commit to giving them protection across the Farne islands, too, as these unique islands and surrounding waters become incorporated into the MCZ as it reaches further north in the months ahead? I understand that informal conversations are already taking place and urge the Minister to drive them forward, so that my constituency’s extraordinary coastline and her feathered residents, whom I consider constituents worthy of representation just as much as the human ones, can live in a place of safety and protection and so that their long-term future is assured.

2.45 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) on securing this debate. It is a nice, uplifting debate on which to finish after several rather fractious points of order during the last private Member’s Bill debate.

As my hon. Friend said, the common eider ranges widely across the Arctic and northern Europe, but is listed as “near threatened” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. As she pointed out, the eider duck has a long-established association with the county of Northumberland, where it was the subject of one of the first acts of conservation. She said that it was in the 8th century that St Cuthbert took action to protect this wonderful species, but I am reliably informed by my Department that St Cuthbert is recorded to have established protection laws—the very first wildlife protection laws we had in this country—for Northumberland’s eiders as early as 676. That shows how important a species it is.

As St Cuthbert is the patron saint of Northumberland, it was natural that the eider should be chosen as the county’s emblem bird, and eiders are still often called Cuddy ducks in the area, with Cuddy being the familiar form of Cuthbert. A stained-glass window in St Cuthbert’s church in Amble commemorates this long-held association. Around 5,000 eiders—approximately one third of the English eider population—are still to be found in Northumberland.

The collection of eider down for use in quilts is recorded as far back as the 14th century. The practice almost led to the eider’s extinction in the 19th century. These days, the greatest threats to eider ducks are nest predation and the degradation of nesting habitats. Adults can also be disturbed by boat traffic at sea, which disrupts their feeding, as my hon. Friend pointed out. Eider ducks are already protected off the Northumberland coast in the Farne islands and Coquet island sites of special scientific interest, and in the Lindisfarne special protection area. They are also included in other designated sites in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

As a wild bird, common eider are also protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Land-based conservation measures are currently implemented to protect eider colonies on the Coquet and Farne islands. Principal activities involve vegetation management to
ensure the continuation of suitable nesting habitat, biosecurity checks, and lethal control measures for rats and gulls, where necessary.

Marine conservation is important to protect our seas, preserve underwater habitats and help sea life to flourish. Oceans are our greatest natural asset and must be protected for the health of our planet and for the prosperity of future generations. In the 25-year environment plan that we published last month, we set out how we will fulfil our ambition to leave the environment in a better state than we found it, building on existing strategies and identifying key areas of focus. We want even cleaner air and water, richer habitats for more wildlife, and an approach to fishing, agriculture and land use that puts the environment first.

Plastic in the seas is of course a hazard for our seabirds. We have regulated for the world’s toughest ban so far against plastic microbeads in cosmetics and personal care products. We must reduce the global reliance on plastics, as well as incentivise the recycling processes to improve waste management, and promote maritime practices that prevent harmful materials from entering the seas.

The UK is at the forefront in establishing marine protected areas. We are committed to delivering a well-managed blue belt around our coasts. We currently have nearly 300 sites protecting 23% of UK waters, 133 of which cover 35% of English inshore and offshore waters. We have 50 marine conservation zones already, protecting a range of marine animals and plants and the seabed habitats on which they depend.

The UK is particularly blessed with seabirds. The UK hosts more than half the seabirds in the EU during the breeding season, with approximately 3.5 million pairs across 26 species. Our seabirds are principally protected by sites of special scientific interest, set up under domestic legislation, and by special protection areas, set up under the birds directive. Across the UK, we now have 106 marine special protection areas, protecting birds and 18,000 square kilometres of the marine habitats on which they depend.

Through the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, we will make sure that marine protected areas set up under European directives will continue to be effectively protected after we have left the EU. We aim to complete our blue belt, and our contribution to the international ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas, with the third and final tranche of marine conservation zones. This will also fulfil our domestic obligation to form a network of sites that protect the range of features in our seas.

The third tranche of marine conservation zones will be consulted on this summer, with designations taking place in 2019. It is at this point, that I will turn to the specific proposal from my hon. Friend relating to eider ducks, which I will return to a little later. If eider ducks are included in the Coquet to St Mary’s marine conservation zone, principally to protect them while foraging. We are considering that proposal very carefully, and the comments that my hon. Friend made in highlighting that in this debate today were well made. I will ensure that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who leads on this issue, and the officials dealing with the MCZ process, are informed of the points that have been made.

In our consultation this summer we will set out which marine conservation zones we are proposing for inclusion in the third tranche. We will explain why they are important for protecting our sea life, and the likely impacts on sea users. I hope that hon. Members will all urge their constituents to take part in that important consultation on a large range of new marine conservation zones.

Of course, it is not enough just to set up marine protected areas; we also need to ensure that they are well managed. So far, 29 new byelaws and 17 voluntary measures have been implemented in marine protected areas specifically for marine conservation purposes. A further 21 byelaws are expected before the end of this year. As we complete our network of marine protected areas we will make sure that the new sites are well managed.

If eider ducks are included in the Coquet to St Mary’s marine conservation zone, management is likely principally to focus on reducing boat disturbance of eider ducks.
while they are foraging, giving them a better chance to survive and breed successfully. I am informed that one of the key concerns is that, because these are large and heavy ducks, frequent disturbance—by speedboats and the like—when they are trying to forage can cause them to expend a lot of energy, which can affect their survival.

We have had a good debate. My hon. Friend raised some important points. I hope she will understand that I am not able to say today exactly what the conclusion or shape of the consultation will be, but I hope I have reassured her that my Department is much sighted on the issue. We are passionate about the importance of the eider duck. I assure her that her proposal is receiving very close attention indeed.

*Question put and agreed to.*

2.56 pm

*House adjourned.*
House of Commons

Monday 26 February 2018

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Domestic Violence

1. Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to reduce the incidence of domestic violence.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Let me begin by updating the House briefly on the recent tragedy in Leicester. Five people are now confirmed to have died in an explosion last night at a shop in Hinckley road. Five others remain in hospital, one with serious injuries. I thank the fire crews who are continuing to search for survivors, and the hospital staff who are working tirelessly to save lives. I know that I speak for all of us when I say that our thoughts are with the family and friends of those who have died, as well as those who have been injured.

Domestic violence is a devastating crime that shatters the lives of victims and families. The Government have introduced a new offence of coercive and controlling behaviour, rolled out new tools to tackle domestic violence—such as protection orders—and committed £100 million to support for victims.

Jo Platt: The number of domestic violence offences in Greater Manchester rose by more than 20% last year, and the local police identified my constituency as a particular hotspot. The police, local authorities and support groups are working flat out to ensure that cases are reported, families are supported and prosecutions take place. Given the significant Government cuts in those services, what steps will the Home Secretary take to ensure that the forthcoming legislation will resource public services adequately so that they are equipped to deal with the rise in domestic violence?

Amber Rudd: I agree with the hon. Lady that tackling domestic violence and abuse is a priority. It will always be a priority for the Government, which is why we are introducing a domestic violence and abuse Bill. There will be a consultation first, and I hope that the hon. Lady will participate in it. There has been an increase in reporting, and although it seems counterintuitive, it is right to welcome that, because it shows that the police are taking domestic violence more seriously, which is exactly what we want.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): The Southern Domestic Abuse Service, which is based in Havant, does great work tackling domestic violence in southern Hampshire. Will my right hon. Friend support the local and regional charities that do such great work, and will she back the service’s recent campaign to raise funds in order to build a women’s refuge in southern Hampshire?

Amber Rudd: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating southern Hampshire on taking action to protect women and to raise funds for refuges. The support of local charities, councillors and local activists is often necessary to ensure that the women in their communities are kept safe.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Marianne and Tracy, two domestic violence victims in my constituency, came to see me to ask me to support their petition asking the Government to do more to tackle serial domestic abuses by, for instance, providing a publicly accessible register to help to prevent perpetrators such as George Ward, their former partner, from successfully targeting new potential victims through dating websites such as Tinder.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is right: serial domestic abusers are one of the worst elements of this whole subject. I encourage her, and her constituents, to participate in the consultation so that we can ensure that that particular trend is addressed.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s article in today’s edition of The Times, which sets out a clear commitment to this important issue. Does the Secretary of State agree that the increased use of screens and video links so that victims of domestic violence can give evidence without having to face their attackers will not only lead to increased reporting, but give the victims a voice in court?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend. I refer to that article. The purpose of the announcements that I have made today is to ensure that victims are more confident about coming forward and of feeling safe, and to ensure that we can be more certain of securing the convictions that they expect and we all want.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): We on the Labour Benches also wish to thank the brave fire crews in Leicester, and our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families.

It is welcome that the Home Secretary has expressed concern about domestic violence, but we know that, on average, two women a week are killed by a current or former partner. That is the end point of too much domestic violence. We also know that the number of refuge services in England has sharply reduced over the last few years. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that it fell from 294 in 2010 to 274 in 2017. It is all very well for the Home Secretary to talk about the role of charities, but what will the Government do to address the funding crisis that refuges now face?
Amber Rudd: I point out to the right hon. Lady that there are more beds available to women seeking them now than there were in 2010. This Government will always make sure there are sufficient numbers of beds for the women who need them, so that women are kept safe when they need to be. Since 2010, domestic abuse prosecutions have risen by 26% and convictions by 33%. It is good that women are able to come forward and that convictions are taking place, but terrible crime and gender-based violence against women remains, so I share the right hon. Lady’s view about the need to do something. She can rest assured that this Government are taking action, and I hope she will support the Bill we will be introducing.

EU Nationals: Residence Rights

2. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What her policy is on residence rights for EU nationals after the UK leaves the EU. [903994]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): European Union citizens resident before we leave the EU are covered by the agreement we reached in December. We welcome the contribution they have made both to our economy and our societies, and they and their families can stay and carry on living their lives here.

Alan Brown: The reality is that many sectors that rely on EU nationals are struggling with recruitment, and the Government have created further uncertainty with mixed messages about the status of EU nationals who come here during any transitional period, so will the Minister provide clarity for businesses and people thinking about coming here? What will be their rights, and will they match the rights of the 3 million EU citizens already living here?

Caroline Nokes: At various points over the last six weeks I have in this House—and, indeed, in Committee—highlighted the rights that will be available to EU nationals living here. The Government have undertaken to provide regular updates, and I can assure the House that that will indeed be the case going forward.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): When might the immigration Bill actually be brought forward, and what is the reason for its lengthy delay?

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Of course, that Bill was the subject of an urgent question in the House, and I made it very clear then that it will be coming forward in due course.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): While protecting the rights of EU nationals who are already here, can the Minister reassure my constituents that, whatever the other details of the final Brexit agreement, it will include the end of free movement?

Caroline Nokes: We have been very clear that, when people voted to leave the European Union back in 2016, that involved the end of free movement, so I can certainly reassure the right hon. Gentleman’s constituents that that will be the case.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am pleased that the Government are delivering on their pledge to secure the rights of EU citizens here—especially those from Taunton Deane. Will my right hon. Friend comment, however, on how straightforward applying to stay might be, and whether we might have a little more detail?

Caroline Nokes: It is very important that we make it clear that, for EU citizens already living here and who have come here before the specified date, we want as smooth and seamless a process as possible. They will be able to apply digitally online, and we want that process to open on a voluntary basis later this year.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The most recent migration statistics show immigration from outside the EU, which the Government have always been able to control, going up, while EU citizens are leaving in their largest numbers for almost a decade. The Government have again postponed their White Paper on post-Brexit immigration strategy. Rather than taking back control, are this Government in fact driven by confusion and inaction?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are working very hard to make sure we have a sustainable immigration system both now and going forward. I welcome the fact that there are so many students coming here to study—he will of course be aware that there is no limit on the number of students who can come to this country—but what I really welcome is the number of EU citizens who came to this country not just looking for a job, but with a job to go to.

Regional Organised Crime Units

3. Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of regional organised crime units in tackling serious and organised crime. [903995]

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): Serious and organised crime does not respect force boundaries, which is why we organise our response at regional level, giving us the ability to tackle organised crime groups head-on. The Government have invested £140 million in ROCUs since 2013, and last year we announced £40 million of additional funding to enhance ROCU capabilities further in areas such as cyber-crime and undercover work.

Mrs Trevelyan: Does my right hon. Friend agree that when using informants to tackle serious and organised crime such as paedophile rings, it should be unacceptable to use paedophiles as informants in such investigations?

Mr Wallace: I understand my hon. Friend’s concern, but I can assure her that the use of informants is strongly controlled by robust safeguards and independent oversight. We must not shy away from using informants, as their use in certain circumstances is vital in stopping some of the worst in society carrying out their crimes.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Minister heard, as I have, from police up and down the country about the influence of Russia in our serious
and organised crime? I hear time and again about Russian money and influence, and about Russians coming in via Malta and Cyprus.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that a number of active Russians and indeed other nationals are involved in organised crime in this country. That is why the Government are reviewing the organised crime strategy that was first published in 2013 and why we introduced the Criminal Finance Act 2017 to give us the powers to deal not only with the people inflicting these crimes but with their money, should they choose to push it through this country.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Security and Economic Crime Minister will be aware of the great number of loyalist and republican crime gangs that operate with organisations in England, Scotland and Wales, and also internationally. He knows that they are subject to the paramilitary taskforce, but will he meet me to discuss how we can ensure that that succeeds?

Mr Wallace: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that matter. We realise that the best way to tackle organised crime is similar to the way in which we have often tackled terrorism in the past—that is, alongside the criminal justice outcome, to use the broad shoulders of the whole state, local authorities, financial regulation, the police and neighbourhoods to tackle these people.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the article in the New York Times—because I sent it to him—about the British television series “McMafia”. Indeed, he was mentioned in that article. Does he agree, though, that while it is important to recognise that many Russians are involved in organised crime, it would be utterly wrong and simplistic to demonise a whole nation and its immigrants in the United Kingdom?

Mr Wallace: There is absolutely no intention of demonising a nation, an ethnicity or a culture. However, it is important to note that illicit money flows into the United Kingdom come predominantly from China and Russia, and that we have to tackle that. The powers in the Criminal Finance Act 2017 will allow us to go upstream and to take real action. If we take their money away, those people will know that they and their dirty money are not welcome in this country, and that they can either go to prison here or go home.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to have had the opportunity to visit the National Crime Agency this morning to see the great work that its staff are doing to tackle crime. However, there is little doubt that the tech giants could be doing a great deal more. I know that the Prime Minister has recently asked them to do so, but she was also asking them to do more in her early months as Home Secretary nearly eight years ago. When can we have more emphasis on action rather than words?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the empowerment that the internet gives to criminals, terrorists and radicalisers is extraordinary. That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has helped to lead the charge in the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, and recently visited silicon valley to ensure that companies there start to deliver. We have seen significant changes involving the taking down of radicalising material and enabling us to catch the bad people who are doing the crimes. It is, however, important to note that one of the ways in which the National Crime Agency, the police and our intelligence services get to the bottom of these crimes is through the use of the powers given to them under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, whose effectiveness some Members in this House still try to block.

Moped Crime

4. Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce moped crime.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is standing up for his constituents in Sutton by asking this question. The Government have drawn up a comprehensive action plan with the police, motorcycle and insurance industry leaders, local councils, charities and representatives of the motorcycle riding community to focus on the causes of moped-enabled crime, and on what works and what needs to be done to prevent these crimes.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Does she agree that the police already have the necessary legal powers to tackle this issue, and that what is important for the Londoners across the 32 London boroughs who are increasingly becoming victims of this crime is that the Government should continue to work with the Met police and the Mayor of London to ensure that those existing powers are used more effectively to tackle this scourge?

Victoria Atkins: I agree that the police have the powers they need, but those powers need to be used in conjunction with charities, local authorities and so on to ensure that we have a thorough response to the problem. We are reviewing the law, guidance and practice around pursuits, because there are concerns about the policy and because we want to be sure that the current arrangements provide the right legal protections for officers who pursue offenders. We will publish the outcome of the review shortly.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I represent a relatively low-crime area that has seen a big increase in moped crime, so what are the Government doing to support the campaign among petrol station owners to stop serving masked riders?

Victoria Atkins: One of my first meetings shortly after my appointment was with the Petrol Retailers Association. Of course, we have to consider all sorts of measures to see what will work, which is why it is so key that our action plan involves not just law enforcement and councils, but those who ride their motorbikes quite legitimately.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): This is not just about mopeds; scrambler bikes and quad bikes are terrorising parts of my constituency. In Maesteg and Caerau,
riders on these bikes are chasing people and blocking them from gaining access to public rights of way. What more can the Minister do to try to tackle the scourge just of mopeds, but of the other types of off-road bikes that can access footpaths and pavements?

Victoria Atkins: We are keen that police forces collaborate on crimes enabled by mopeds and other smaller vehicles. For example, the Metropolitan police is now using DNA sprays, and we have great hopes that that will help to catch offenders. Such measures should be shared around constabularies to ensure that offenders are brought to justice.

Mr Speaker: I must say that I feel considerably better informed about the moped situation now than I was five minutes ago. I hope that colleagues feel the same.

Tier 2 Visas

5. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of removing the tier 2 visa cap.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The cap on tier 2 visas was set in 2011 following advice from the Migration Advisory Committee. It enables the Government to control migration and encourages employers to look first to the domestic workforce before recruiting from overseas. The Government are clear that carefully controlled economic migration benefits the economy, but we remain committed to reducing migration and protecting the jobs of British workers. We keep all immigration routes under review to ensure that the system serves the national interest.

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the Minister, but given that the cap has been reached three times in the past three months, what would she say to employers that are desperate for skilled staff, such as Addenbrooke’s Hospital in Cambridge? They find those people, but then discover that the Government say that they cannot come here. Is it really Government policy to deny the national health service the skilled people that it needs?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that no medical professionals on the shortage occupation list have been refused a visa. It is important that we keep things under review and ensure that we recruit more doctors and nurses from within the UK, and my right hon. Friend the Health and Social Care Secretary is committed to ensuring that the number of training places for both nurses and doctors increases.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the levels of staff and skills shortages in a series of economic sectors, including the NHS and social care? How does she see the impacts on these sectors if there are further restrictions on migration for such purposes?

Caroline Nokes: Nurses are on the shortage occupation list, meaning that no nurse is turned away. The important thing is that we keep the matter under review and that we understand the situation through our work with the Migration Advisory Committee, which is looking at the pattern of EU work routes in this country, so that we come forward with an immigration policy that reflects the needs of our economy.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Has the Home Office decided whether EU citizens wanting to come to the UK to work in our NHS post Brexit will be subject to the tier 2 visa cap? If no decision has yet been taken, when do Ministers intend to end the uncertainty facing NHS employers?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. He will have heard me say earlier that we will come forward with an immigration Bill in due course. He will also have heard me undertake to ensure that the House is updated on our EU exit policies in regular time, and that will of course happen.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I start by associating my party with the Home Secretary’s remarks about the tragedy in Leicester. Our thoughts and prayers are very much with the families.

The Minister suggests that the tier 2 cap situation is under review. With respect, that is not good enough. Failed applicants in the past three months may have no option but to apply again in the months ahead, making it ever more competitive for tier 2 certificates of sponsorship, which will make the problem much worse. Surely, if there is some sort of review, or if we have to wait for the Migration Advisory Committee, it makes sense to lift the cap in the meantime.

Caroline Nokes: We are very clear that businesses should look first to employ people from within the UK, and we remain committed to reducing migration to sustainable levels. Interestingly, businesses have told us that our system compares well with our global competitors and that businesses like its speed and certainty.

Stuart C. McDonald: The system works well for some businesses, but not for all. Breaching the tier 2 cap essentially meant that, to qualify for a certificate of sponsorship in December 2017, a job was required to offer a salary of £55,000 or above. That might be common enough for multinational companies in London, but it is much rarer elsewhere.

Given the Government say that they want a system that works for the whole United Kingdom, will the Minister make available information on the geographic spread of jobs that qualified for certificates of sponsorship over the past three months when the cap was breached?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that, of course, we keep a separate shortage occupation list for Scotland, if that is what he is referring to, but that broadly reflects the shortage occupations across the whole UK. We look carefully at this issue, as he might expect, but it is important that he reflects on the fact that we are determined to have an immigration system in the UK that works for the whole country.

Security Spending (Calais)

6. Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): How much and what proportion of the Government’s actual and planned spending on security in Calais will be allocated to anti-trafficking and child protection.

Caroline Nokes: I am grateful to the Minister, but
The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Since 2014 the United Kingdom has invested approximately £200 million to fund joint co-operation on illegal migration in northern France and committed another £44.5 million at the recent UK-France summit. Funding focuses on improving port security and infrastructure; facilities for children; accommodation; tackling organised crime, including trafficking; and support with returning migrants. We have allocated £3.6 million to work with France to improve identification and transfer of asylum seekers between the UK and France, including children, under the Dublin regulation.

Stella Creasy: Border Force tells us that it is stopping around 1,000 people a week who are trying to get to the UK, a third of whom are minors, but those children are not being taken into care or asked whether they have family elsewhere—just like Mohammed Hassan, a teenager who had family in Bahrain but was stopped by our Border Force, sent back and died two days later trying again. What action are the Government taking to make sure that our Border Force people are not sending children into the hands of traffickers?

Caroline Nokes: I am sure the hon. Lady would welcome my comment about working to combat organised crime, and we should always reflect that many perilous journeys that are made are in the hands of organised criminals. Any loss of life is an absolute tragedy, but it is important we reflect that our juxtaposed controls are an important part of our border. Our Border Force staff are incredibly well trained and look for vulnerabilities wherever they might see them. She makes an important point, and we are committed to doing more to make sure we meet our allocation of Dubs children. Also, under the Dublin regulation, we continue to resettle thousands of children every year.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that our recent agreement with the French Government will not merely treat the symptoms of the problem but address the deeper-rooted problem by reducing the number of migrant journeys to northern France?

Caroline Nokes: An important component of the recent treaty looks at the whole route of migration. It is critical that we understand we cannot solve this solely by working with France. There is a real commitment with both Italy and Greece to make sure that, particularly with reference to our Dubs commitment, we resettle the children we are determined to bring to the UK.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Thousands of unaccompanied children at risk of trafficking and exploitation still sit in camps in Europe and further afield. Many of them have family members in the UK, so will the Minister amend the immigration regulations so that these desperate children can join their relatives here in the UK to be granted safety and sanctuary?

Caroline Nokes: We have a number of schemes that already allow children to come to the UK, including Dublin and the Dubs commitment that I have outlined. We are determined to make sure that we meet our international commitments and our humanitarian commitments, to make sure that, where we can help children in desperate need across the continent and, indeed, in the wider middle east and north Africa region, we do so.

Online Radicalisation

7. Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What steps is she taking to safeguard people from online radicalisation.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Government have been clear that there should be no space online for terrorists and supporters to radicalise, recruit, incite or inspire. The UK has led the way in setting up the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, to ensure that the larger communications service providers and all internet providers take down that material.

Rehman Chishti: I thank the Home Secretary for that answer. From speaking to experts such as Professor Peter Neumann from King’s College London, I am aware that the vast majority of Daesh supporters have moved away from using online systems such as Facebook and Twitter, and are now using private messaging systems such as Telegram. What steps has the Home Secretary taken, by working with such organisations, to help to tackle these threats?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important point. He is right to say that a lot of the activity by radicalised people has migrated to the smaller sites. That is partly due to the some of the success that Facebook and Twitter have had; these people are now moving to the smaller sites. We reckon that more than 450 were set up just last year. It is so important to have the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism because the larger companies have committed to working with the smaller companies to show them how to adapt their platforms to keep the terrorists offline.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): But how does it give the public confidence in the Government’s anti-radicalisation and anti-terrorism strategy for the former British soldier James Matthews, who fought alongside our Kurdish allies against ISIS in Syria, to be prosecuted for terrorist offences?

Amber Rudd: There are certain elements to this and I cannot be drawn on individual ones because that particular case is sub judice. However, I understand that there are concerns about the level way in which the Government are approaching this. No individual from this country can go out and fight with another person’s army or terrorist organisation in order perhaps to promote their own way of life. We have to be very clear and even-handed about this.

Prisoners: Social Media and Mobile Phones

8. Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on monitoring crimes committed by prisoners via social media and mobile phones.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Prisoners’ illegal use of mobile phones enables their continued offending, threatens the safety and security of our prisons, and harms our communities. The Government have introduced
legislation to disconnect mobile phones in prisons remotely; they have invested £2 million in mobile phone detection equipment; and the Ministry of Justice is working closely with mobile network operators to deliver cutting-edge technology to prevent mobile phones from being smuggled into prisons and then working.

Clive Efford: I thank the Minister for her answer, but I have recently been dealing with two cases where violent partners have been running a campaign of threats and intimidation from within prison against their former partners, yet they are still up for parole. It does not seem that the police locally, who are investigating these crimes, are contacting the MOJ and the Prison Service to ensure that this is taken into account when these people are considered for parole.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will appreciate that I am not able to comment specifically on those cases, but I ask him to write to me about them so that we can see what further can be done. I want to emphasise that it is getting harder and harder for prisoners to get mobile phones into prisons and to then use them. Indeed, at least 150 phones have been disconnected since the telecommunications restriction regulations came into force.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): We know that in December some 79 illegal mobile phones were seized as a result of joint operations between police and the Prison Service at HMP Hewell. What steps are being taken by the Home Office, police and crime commissioners and the Prison Service to set up proper protocols and systems for joint working between the police and the Prison Service? Obviously, illegal activity is taking place on the outside in order to get these phones in, as well as within the prisons.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, as Chair of the Justice Committee he knows a great deal about this. More than 23,000 handsets and SIM cards were seized from prisons last year. The Government are investing £25 million to create a new security directorate in prisons and £14 million to transform key areas impeding police efficiency. Crucial steps are being taken by the Home Office, police and crime commissioners to deny offenders space to operate in prisons.

Police Efficiency

9. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Which is the (a) most and (b) least efficient police force in the UK.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Her Majesty’s inspectorate reports regularly on efficiency. In its last report, it ranked two forces as outstanding. Thames Valley and Durham, 30 forces as good, including Northamptonshire, and 10 forces as requiring improvement.

Mr Hollobone: Are the most efficient forces getting together with the least efficient forces so that the least efficient can raise their game?

Mr Hurd: That is an excellent question. One of the great challenges that faces our 43-force police system is how we encourage and support greater collaboration and the greater spreading of ideas. We have joint working groups on emergency services collaboration and it is something that we look at closely.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): For my constituents there is only one true test of police efficiency: can we sleep easily at night, free from crime, and are there police on the streets to keep us safe? On Merseyside, where the police are rated good, reported incidents of burglary are up by 22%, rape is up by 32%, robbery is up by 31% and the list goes on. The only thing that is down is the number of police: we had 4,700 police officers five years ago; today, the number is less than 3,500. What can the Minister do to reassure the people of Merseyside about this terrible situation?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady omitted one other figure that is up: the amount of cash available to Merseyside police. It is up £5.2 million next year and I hope she will welcome that number.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): In Northamptonshire, we have seen cutting-edge policing and fire service innovation, which is leading to better outcomes for local people. How can that innovation be shared with other forces? Will the Government continue to support innovation as much as possible?

Mr Hurd: I think it is fair to say that Northamptonshire is closely associated with best practice on collaboration among the emergency services and sets an example to the rest of the country. My hon. Friend will be aware that the local police and crime commissioner, Stephen Mold, has applied for joint governance of fire and police. That is in the system.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Sutton police are very efficient. Is the Minister aware of the London Mayor’s plans that would see the merger of Sutton, Bromley and Croydon police? Does he share my concern that that would lead to their being less efficient and unable to focus on the needs of each borough in the way they should?

Mr Hurd: Like the right hon. Gentleman, I am a London MP, and my constituents express similar concerns about plans in north-west London. The bottom line is that these operating decisions are being driven by the police and crime commissioner team and the commissioner. They are accountable to the public for their decisions.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary identified forensics as one of the key areas impeding police efficiency. Crucial forensics tests can make the difference as to whether a person is jailed or loses their family or their job, yet shockingly the Minister told me in a recent written answer that private providers in civil cases do not need to meet any specific scientific standards. There is no regulation in this area at all. Forensics is becoming the wild west of the criminal justice system, so when will the Government stop dithering and give the regulators the powers they have been calling for?
Mr Hurd: I do not think the hon. Lady’s description of a wild west does justice to the regulators’ work in this space. In fact, everyone agrees that standards have increased on our watch. We have made it clear that we want to put powers on a statutory basis and are actively exploring opportunities for the parliamentary time to do just that.

Fire Services

10. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the correlation between trends in the number of firefighters and in fire service response times. [904002]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is true that fire response times have increased gradually over the past 20 years, but over the same period the number of fires, fire-related fatalities and non-fatal casualties has decreased. There is no clear link between response times and firefighter numbers. As I am sure the hon. Lady will know, a range of factors influence response times, including changing traffic levels and call-handling policy.

Liz Twist: Tyne and Wear fire and rescue service has the lowest per-incident spending power of any fire and rescue service. When do the Government intend to start to fund fire and rescue services based on risk, not just on demand?

Mr Hurd: Tyne and Wear will receive £47.7 million of core spending power in 2018-19. That is an increase of 0.8% compared with 2017-18. It also has £23 million of non-ring-fenced reserves, representing almost 50% of revenue.

Fire Services: Funding and Pay

11. Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): What assessment she has made of recent trends in funding and pay for firefighters. [904003]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is the responsibility of the National Joint Council to consider what pay award is appropriate for firefighters in England. Central Government have no role in the process.

Thelma Walker: Firefighters go into burning buildings to save lives. They are professional, compassionate heroes who put their lives at risk to save our families. Can the Minister look every one of them in the eye and tell them it is acceptable that they have received a pay cut in real terms?

Mr Hurd: What I say to the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] I do apologise—man flu. What I say to the hon. Lady is that the Government are determined to make sure that firefighters, who do difficult, dangerous work—as we have seen today in Leicester—get fair pay for their work. It is also very true, as she suggested, that over recent years they have been asked to make sacrifices as part of the contribution to getting on top of the deficit we inherited from Labour.

Active pay negotiations are going on between the employer and employees at the moment, which we are watching closely. It is for them to sort out. We believe that fire authorities have the resources to make an appropriate offer, but we are watching the situation closely and engaging with them. If we can help, we will, but we need to see a business case for that.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Last night’s fire in Leicestershire, in which five people sadly lost their lives, once again highlighted the bravery of our firefighters. The number of firefighters has been cut by 11,000 since 2010, and their wages have seen a real-terms cut. The current level of un-earmarked reserves equates to just three weeks’ operating costs, at the same time as deaths in fires have increased. I ask the Minister to reconsider the levels of funding and resourcing for our fire service. There has been praise today for our firefighters. When will the Government pay them a fair wage for the courageous work they undertake?

Mr Hurd: No one disputes the courageous work that firefighters do: we saw it at Grenfell and we saw it yesterday in Leicestershire. The point is that active negotiations are going on between those who are responsible—employer and employee. Central Government do not have a role in that process, unless we are called in for additional support.

The hon. Lady mentions reserves. Labour is in denial on this. The fact is that the fire system, which claims to be short of cash, has increased its reserves by £288 million since 2011. Reserves can only be increased by not using the money received, so our question to the fire service is, “Tell us what you are going to do with the public’s money.”

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

12. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What steps the Government are taking to support refugees and asylum seekers. [904004]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The level of support provided to refugees and asylum seekers will vary depending on their status in the UK and the route that they were granted. Last week in Lebanon, I heard first hand how important our resettlement scheme is and how it helps individuals and families fleeing danger and conflict to rebuild their lives.

David Linden: I thank the Home Secretary for that answer, but a recent report from Refugee Rights Europe showed that two thirds of asylum seekers feel unsafe or very unsafe in their accommodation. At my surgery on Friday, I met a Malawian constituent who showed me photographs of her accommodation, which is simply unacceptable. Will the Home Secretary agree to meet me to discuss not just my constituent’s case, but that recent report by Refugee Rights Europe?

Amber Rudd: We are committed to ensuring that all asylum seekers are kept in safe accommodation, so I will of course meet the hon. Gentleman to look at the evidence. But I take this opportunity to thank the city of Glasgow, which does so much—way above proportionately—to look after vulnerable people and to assist with the Syrian and vulnerable people refugee scheme.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking Worcestershire County Council, which recently agreed to resettle 50 more Syrian refugees,
taking the total to 100 in the county? That is a real contribution to this country’s efforts to resettle the refugees.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that up, and I join her in thanking her council for doing that. The great success of the Syrian and vulnerable people resettlement scheme was something that I was able to celebrate last week, when we passed the halfway mark—we passed 10,000, of whom half are children. It is the generosity of British people and the support of local authorities and councils that has allowed that to take place. We must all be mindful of the work that our councils and communities do.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am very pleased that one of the first families to be resettled from Syria under the community sponsorship scheme lives in my constituency. But they are trying to bring over their parents for an important family visit, and the parents are in a refugee camp in Lebanon and cannot supply the necessary evidence to complete their application. Will the Home Secretary or Immigration Minister meet me to discuss the case and the wider issue affecting refugees seeking to make visits here?

Amber Rudd: I understand the difficulty and heartbreak that there can be for the wider families when families are resettled over here. We have to allow the UNHCR to do its job and to make its selection based on who is the most vulnerable. There are some schemes, small though they are, that allow for additional family resettlement. I welcome the hon. Lady. Lady meeting one of my ministerial colleagues to discuss the matter, but I must put before the House the fact that, although we do resettle families, resettling the wider family would take up too much of the space allowed.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I recently met refugee families at an event run by the volunteers of the Milngavie refugee action group. One woman there showed me heartbreaking footage on her phone of injured children being removed from rubble. She had been sent the footage by her sister, who is stranded in Syria. Given how few Syrian refugees we have taken in to date, what hope can the Government give to refugees who are stuck in danger in Syria or in refugee camps in neighbouring countries?

Amber Rudd: We have all seen those pictures and images of children—I saw for myself just last week the children in the refugee camp in Lebanon—and the situation is heartbreaking. The UK is doing the right thing by taking up to 20,000 refugees by 2020. That is five times as many as were resettled from the region under the former Labour Government, and it is more than any other European country in terms of resettlement from the region. The UK is doing its bit, but this is a dual approach. As the hon. Lady no doubt knows, we are one of the largest bilateral donors to the area, having put in £2.4 billion since the Syrian crisis began.

**Leaving the EU: Preparations**

14. Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): What steps her Department has taken to prepare for the UK leaving the EU; and if she will make a statement. [904006]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Department continues to make preparations for a range of possible outcomes from the UK’s negotiations with the European Union, working in close co-ordination with the Department for Exiting the European Union and others. We are already recruiting additional staff in Border Force and across the wider UK Visas and Immigration department to ensure that the correct preparations for leaving the European Union are well under way.

Charlie Elphicke: Can my right hon. Friend tell the House how much has been invested in our borders since the referendum and how much is planned between now and Brexit day in March 2019? Will the Home Office be ready on day one, prepared for every single eventuality?

Caroline Nokes: As I reassured my hon. Friend, we are making preparations for every eventuality. The Home Office has already invested £60 million in 2017-18. We will continue to review the funding position as negotiations continue and details of the final agreement become clearer. As he might expect, we are in continuing discussions with Her Majesty’s Treasury.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The phase 1 agreement before Christmas rightly confirmed the Government’s commitment to the avoidance of a hard border in Northern Ireland, including any physical infrastructure or related checks and controls. The Minister will know the concerns of the Police Service of Northern Ireland that any infrastructure at all could pose a security threat. So far, the Government have not set out any way in which to operate border and customs checks—if the UK is outside a customs union—without some kind of physical infrastructure such as, for example, cameras at or near the border. Will the Minister confirm that the Government’s commitment to no physical infrastructure also means a commitment to no cameras at or near the border, which would also pose a security threat?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Lady will be aware that we have made a very firm commitment to no hard border, and that we will continue to update the House as negotiations progress.

**Alcohol Abuse**

15. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of alcohol abuse on levels of crime and costs of policing. [904008]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): As a proportion of overall violence, alcohol-related violent crime climbed steadily from 41% in 1995 to 55% in 2009-10. More recently, it has fallen back to 49% of all violent crime in 2016-17. The cost of alcohol misuse to society is estimated to be around £21 billion a year, with alcohol-related crime estimated to account for around £11 billion a year. We continue to work with the police to equip them with the right powers to take effective action.

Kelvin Hopkins: The Minister is obviously aware of the terrible damage that alcohol does, but is she aware of a recent report implicating alcohol as a major factor...
in child abuse among other things? When are the Government going to take serious, comprehensive and effective action to reduce alcohol abuse, and the suffering and cost that it still inflicts across our society?

**Victoria Atkins:** Both the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care take this issue very seriously. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Secretary of State for Health recently announced a report on helping children of alcoholic parents. Violent crime is down and alcohol consumption overall is down, particularly among young people, but of course it is very important to look at this issue, particularly in relation to domestic abuse. We will be looking at how we can deal with it, in combination with the Department of Health, as part of our modern crime prevention strategy.

**Dr Sarah Wollaston** (Totnes) (Con): It has just been confirmed that all alcoholic drinks in Scotland must cost at least 50p per unit from May this year. Will the Minister now review our alcohol strategy to allow us to take up this evidence-based policy that will do so much to tackle the scourge of cheap, high-strength alcohol and reduce pressure on our emergency services?

**Victoria Atkins:** We are of course aware of the Scottish Parliament’s policy on this, and we are looking at it with interest. We set out our alcohol strategy in the 2016 strategy on dealing with modern crime, but we keep the issue under review.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): I was one of those who was persuaded years back that we needed to reform our late-night drinking laws. The reality is that this has been a failure. Will the Government seriously consider talking to our police forces and local authorities about how we can ensure a more rational way of dealing with late-night drinking, so that we do not see the problems that it currently causes?

**Victoria Atkins:** Very much so. This is obviously a matter for review and for police and crime commissioners and local police forces to look at in their own local areas. We have changed the late-night levy to try to make it more flexible and targeted, so that district councils and others can use it for the areas that present the most harm in terms of the night-time economy.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): On Saturday night I was out with Inspector Simon Jenkinson and his team seeing how they police Torquay’s night-time economy. Does the Minister agree that it is important that councils work with their local policing teams? Will she agree to meet to discuss how we can review some of the more outdated provisions, such as the Vagrancy Acts, which have a real impact on our night-time economy?

**Victoria Atkins:** Local councils and local policing teams know where the hotspots of trouble can be in their local areas. That is why it is essential that councils and police work together. Of course I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this important issue.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [904018] **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I would like to update the House on the UK’s recent ranking as one of the least corrupt countries in the world following our decisive action to tackle corruption both at home and abroad. Transparency International’s corruption perceptions index ranks 180 countries on perceived public sector corruption. In the latest index, published only last Wednesday, the UK moved up two places from joint tenth least corrupt in the world to joint eighth. We now have the second-highest score in the G20.

Our improved position reflects the proactive approach that this Government have taken to combat corruption, but we recognise that there is still more to do. The national anti-corruption strategy published in December establishes an ambitious framework to tackle corruption to 2022 and contains over 100 commitments to guide Government efforts. I know that Ministers and the Prime Minister’s anti-corruption champion, my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), will support me in driving efforts across Government and around the world.

Mr Sweeney: Despite overwhelming evidence from over 90 cities around the world, the Home Secretary still intransigently prevents a pilot study on unsafe drug consumption in the city of Glasgow, where drug-related deaths are at epidemic levels. Why is she being so intransigent on this issue?

Amber Rudd: I do not find the evidence as conclusive as the hon. Gentleman does. We have looked at this. It is an area that is constantly having different reviews and different champions. If he wants to come and meet the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, I am happy for him to do that, but we cannot see, at the moment, any reason to change the policy.

T2. [904019] **Sir Patrick McLoughlin** (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What progress is being made in bringing together the work of the police service and the fire service as emergency services? Is there not a case also for looking at whether the ambulance service should come under the same jurisdiction?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. To his last point, the answer is yes, and Northamptonshire is a good example of where emergency services are working across the lights. I am delighted to say that on 1 October, Roger Hirst of Essex police became the country’s first police, fire and crime commissioner. Six other police and crime commissioners have submitted proposals to take on fire, and we aim to make an announcement soon.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Ministers will be aware that I visited Yarl’s Wood immigration detention centre last week, after a year of asking the Home Office to be allowed to visit. Are
Ministers are aware of the long-standing concerns about the quality of medical care at Yarl’s Wood—concerns that were raised with me by so many women last week? Is the Minister aware that victims of trafficking and sexual abuse are being held at Yarl’s Wood, contrary to Government undertakings? Is the Minister aware that some women at Yarl’s Wood are on hunger strike—a hunger strike that the Home Office flatly refuses to admit is happening? The women of Yarl’s Wood are desperate, and we owe them a duty of care. Will the Minister agree to meet with me, so that I can share with her the specific concerns that so many women raised with me?

Amber Rudd: I am always delighted to meet the right hon. Lady and to listen carefully to any suggestions that she has and her experiences of visiting Yarl’s Wood. We take the health of everybody at any detention centre very seriously. There are high standards there, and if there are any examples otherwise, we will always take a look at them. I was concerned by some of her suggestions afterwards when she made her speech. Immigration detention centres play an important part in enforcing our immigration rules. Some of the people there are very dangerous, and it is right that they are detained and then removed.

T3. [904020] Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As soon as the Government’s best-value inspection of Northamptonshire County Council is concluded at the end of March, will the Policing and Fire Minister facilitate the transfer of the fire and rescue service to the police and crime commissioner?

Mr Hurd: As my hon. Friend knows, an application has been made with a business case that has been independently assessed. We have had to delay a decision on that because of the inspection in Northamptonshire, as we need to make sure that the financial projection assumptions made by Northamptonshire County Council are built on rock rather than sand. He appreciates that. As soon as that process is resolved, we want to move ahead with a decision as quickly as possible.

T5. [904022] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Many constituents have contacted me about the limited provisions on refugee family reunion. Will the Minister undertake to expand those provisions, in line with my constituents’ concerns?

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She will be aware that we had a Westminster Hall debate on that subject last week and that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) has a private Member’s Bill on it, which will come forward on 16 March. This is a policy area where we enable some refugee families to be reunited here. We have a proud track record of so far resettling 10,000 of the 20,000 we are expecting under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. This is an important policy. We are determined to be as compassionate as we can within the commitments we have already made.

T4. [904021] Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Kent police, which has been rated outstanding for the third year in a row by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary? It is the only police force to get such a rating and is doing a fantastic job in keeping the residents of Kent and Medway safe.

Mr Hurd: I can certainly do that. Kent police is regularly rated excellent for the good service it delivers. It performs well across all strands of inspection and has been rated outstanding for the legitimacy with which it keeps people safe and reduces crime. Through my hon. Friend, I would like to congratulate the commissioner, the leadership and all the frontline officers in Kent for the outstanding work they do.

T6. [904024] Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): In Rotherham, 1,510 adult survivors of child sexual exploitation have now been identified by the National Crime Agency. Both the Minister and the Home Secretary know that unless there is a package of support around those adults, the cases will start to falter. Will the Minister support Rotherham’s funding application to get a package of care around those adult survivors?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for the meeting that she asked me to attend with leaders of Rotherham Council and the police. There has been and continues to be significant Government investment in response to child sexual exploitation in Rotherham, including £5.17 million to fund transformational change there, funding for police forces to meet the costs of unexpected events and up to £2 million for children’s social care in recognition of social workers’ increased workload resulting from the investigation of CSE. We have previously provided approximately £3.6 million for Operation Stovewood in the last two years, and we are considering an application for funding for the costs of investigation in 2017-18.

T7. [904025] Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that although we are leaving the European Union, the Government remain committed to very close security and counter-terrorism co-operation with our European friends to keep our constituents safe?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right that successful data transfer—through existing schemes such as Schengen Information System II and the European Criminal Records Information System and, indeed, the use of Europol data—is one of the things that keeps all our citizens safe and keeps other European citizens safe too. That is why the UK has proposed a third-party treaty, so that we can engage just as successfully and just as fully with the European Union as we have done previously, keeping Londoners in Paris and Parisians in London just as safe after we leave as they were before.

T8. [904026] Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I understand that the Minister met the family of Alfie Dingley this morning. Following statements in the House last week that the Minister wants to help to find a solution within the existing regulations, will he update the House on when Alfie and others in a similar position will receive the medicines they need?

Mr Hurd: I confirm to the hon. Lady that I did indeed meet the parents and grandmother of Alfie this morning to progress exactly what I said at the Dispatch Box last week about our intention to explore every option within the existing regulations to help Alfie.
Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): But should not the provision of prescription medicines, even if derived from narcotics, be a purely clinical matter?

Mr Hurd: As I have said, I am looking at this through the lens of what we can do within the existing regulations to support Alfie, and those decisions will be clinically led.

Mr Hurd: [904027]Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What discussions has the Home Secretary had with Cabinet colleagues on preparing for cyber-attacks against critical national infrastructure?

Amber Rudd: This is an area that we will constantly keep under review. It is an area that is sometimes covered by the Cabinet. We have the national cyber-security strategy, backed up by the National Cyber Security Centre. It is something we are very aware of and will continue to discuss in order to make sure that this country is kept safe.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I have been contacted by a local optician in Elgin. He is a tier 2 sponsor, but because optometry is not listed as a priority profession, he has been affected by the tier 2 cap being reached in recent months. Will the Minister and colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care consider including optometrists as priority professionals for tier 2 visas?

Caroline Nokes: The tier 2 cap operates to ensure that our immigration system brings the best talent to the UK while still controlling numbers. Any profession on the shortage occupation list automatically gets priority. The shortage occupation list is determined by the independent Migration Advisory Committee. It has not yet included opticians on the list, but as my hon. Friend will know, it is currently carrying out a major labour market review.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): We know that we have a flat-cash police settlement this year and we know that local ratepayers are going to have to pay increased rates to meet the need, but do we yet know who is going to pay for the police pay rise, given the Police Federation’s 3.4% request today?

Mr Hurd: As the former Policing Minister knows very well, we have to look at the police settlement in the round, balancing the cash that the taxpayer pays from the centre—the Home Office—and the cash that the local taxpayer pays through the precept. We responded to both the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council on additional precept flexibility. That allowed us to put forward a settlement that will see investment in the police increase by £450 million next year—an increase that the Labour party opposed.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Is the Home Office confident that it and its agencies can compete with the private sector, and recruit and retain people with the key digital and cyber skills that we need?

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): For security reasons, I am unable to comment on specific recruitment levels and on the geographical distribution of police and intelligence agencies in specialist areas, but I assure my hon. Friend that we are seeing strong levels of recruitment. GCHQ and the National Crime Agency are doing great work in encouraging the next generation of cyber-sleuths through their Cyber First programme.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am sure the Policing Minister will be as concerned as I am about the 309 assaults on police officers in Humberside in the past year. What more will the Government do to keep our brave police officers safe on the streets?

Mr Hurd: I absolutely share the hon. Lady’s concern about an increase in assaults on police, which is why we are looking very favourably at supporting the emergency workers protection Bill—the “protect the protectors” Bill—to try to have greater safeguards through the law. On engagement with police leadership, we keep under regular and constant review the application of operational tools at their disposal, such as Tasers.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): In using the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 to penalise rogue landlords and breaches in planning law, local authorities can act as a deterrent and also compensate council tax payers who end up footing the bill. Given that Sussex local authorities have used only one such power, what more can my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime do to encourage them to use more of them?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right to point out his worries. We hope that the Criminal Finances Act 2017 will give a new boost to training local authority officers to deliver on it and increase the amount we take from rogue landlords and property owners.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): A number of migrant workers are starting to lose their jobs because of delays in the renewal and extension of visas. What can the Home Secretary do to speed up the process, so that they do not face that problem in the future?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman will have to give me a bit more information—which sort of migrant workers and where? Of course, there has been no change to EU citizens being able to come and go, nor will there be until we have actually left the European Union. In terms of any other types of migrant workers, I ask him to write to me with more information.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service has already spoken about the benefits of collaboration between emergency services and will be aware of proposed closer working between Warwickshire and West Midlands fire services, while there is already a strategic partnership between Warwickshire and West Mercia police services. Is there any potential conflict if Warwickshire’s blue-light services collaborate with bodies from different areas?

Mr Hurd: There is no conflict as far as I can see. We are keen to encourage the greatest levels of collaboration between our emergency services.
Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When constituents have no recourse to public funds, serious delays in processing their visas result in them being plunged into abject poverty. What is the Home Secretary doing about that?

Amber Rudd: I did not hear the start of the hon. Lady’s question, but I think she was referring in particular to women who have no recourse to public funds. I am concerned about that, and it will be covered partly in our consultation. If she has other concerns about that particular cohort who are applying for refugee status, I urge her to contact my Department.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): With Suffolk police being one of the lowest-funded forces with the highest number of case loads per officer in the country, will the Policing Minister set out a timetable for reviewing the police funding formula?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend is an assiduous campaigner on behalf of Suffolk police, and he knows that next year, as a result of the funding settlement, it will get an additional £3.6 million. I have made it clear that we will be looking at the fair funding formula in the context of the next comprehensive spending review, because we think that is the most appropriate framework to do so. Although we do not have an exact timetable, I expect that work to start soon.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I note the encouraging words from the Immigration Minister, as well as her excellent pronunciation. Refugees would be greatly helped by the passing of the private Member’s Bill on family reunion, which will receive its Second Reading in the House on Friday 16 March. It is supported by the British Red Cross, Amnesty International, the Refugee Council, Oxfam and United Nations agencies. Given the Minister’s good, warm words, which I welcome, how much thought have the Government given to supporting that Bill to enable families to have very clear rights to be together, which of course is the best security they could have?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I am sure he will understand the trepidation with which I seek to pronounce his constituency name—that was the second time I have managed it in a week. As I have said, we will look very carefully at his Bill, which I understand he published only at the beginning of last week, and we will have a full opportunity to debate it on 16 March.

Mr Speaker: The pronunciation struck me as magnificent, and I hope it will be shared with the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, preferably sooner rather than later.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There are lots of people wishing to speak, but I am afraid there is no time. If there are points of order—I had an indication that there was likely to be one—they must they come after the urgent question.
Syria: De-escalation Zones

3.39 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): (Urgent Question) To ask the Foreign Secretary what action the UK Government are taking on the conflict and humanitarian situation inside de-escalation zones in Syria following attacks on civilians in the last week.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for raising this vital issue.

In seven years of bloodshed, the war in Syria has claimed 400,000 lives and driven 11 million people from their homes, causing a humanitarian tragedy on a scale unknown anywhere else in the world. The House should never forget that the Assad regime, aided and abetted by Russia and Iran, has inflicted the overwhelming burden of that suffering. Assad’s forces are now bombing the enclave of eastern Ghouta, where 393,000 people are living under siege, enduring what has become a signature tactic of the regime, whereby civilians are starved and pounded into submission. With bitter irony, Russia and Iran declared eastern Ghouta to be a “de-escalation area” in May last year and promised to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid. But the truth is that Assad’s regime has allowed only one United Nations convoy to enter eastern Ghouta so far this year and that carried supplies for only a fraction of the area’s people. Hundreds of civilians have been killed in eastern Ghouta in the last week alone and the House will have noted the disturbing reports of the use of chlorine gas. I call for those reports to be fully investigated and for anyone held responsible for using chemical weapons in Syria to be held accountable.

Over the weekend I discussed the situation with my Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Sa’ad Hariri, the Prime Minister of Lebanon. Earlier today, I spoke to Sigmar Gabriel, the German Foreign Minister, and I shall be speaking to other European counterparts and António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, in the next few days. Britain has joined with our allies to mobilise the Security Council to demand a ceasefire across the whole of Syria and the immediate delivery of emergency aid to all in need. Last Saturday, after days of prevarication from Russia, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2401, demanding that “all parties cease hostilities without delay” and allow the “safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid” along with “medical evacuations of the critically sick and wounded”.

The main armed groups in eastern Ghouta have accepted the ceasefire, but as of today, the warplanes of the Assad regime are still reported to be striking targets in the enclave and the UN has been unable to deliver any aid. I remind the House that hundreds of thousands of civilians are going hungry in eastern Ghouta only a few miles from UN warehouses in Damascus that are laden with food. The Assad regime must allow the UN to deliver those supplies, in compliance with resolution 2401, and we look to Russia and Iran to make sure this happens, in accordance with their own promises. I have invited the Russian Ambassador to come to the Foreign Office and give an account of his country’s plans to implement resolution 2401. I have instructed the UK mission at the UN to convene another meeting of the Security Council to discuss the Assad regime’s refusal to respect the will of the UN and implement the ceasefire without delay.

Only a political settlement in Syria can ensure that the carnage is brought to an end and I believe that such a settlement is possible if the will exists. The UN special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, is ready to take forward the talks in Geneva, and the opposition are ready to negotiate pragmatically and without preconditions. The international community has united behind the path to a solution laid out in UN resolution 2254 and Russia has stated its wish to achieve a political settlement under the auspices of the UN. Today, only the Assad regime stands in the way of progress. I urge Russia to use all its influence to bring the Assad regime to the negotiating table and take the steps towards peace that Syria’s people so desperately need.

John Woodcock: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that response. Last week, 527 people were killed in Ghouta, including 129 children. The bombardment killed over 250 people in just two days—the deadliest 48 hours in the conflict since the 2013 gas attack, also on Ghouta. This House failed them then; now surely we must find the courage to act. Right now, a team led by British surgeon, David Nott, is ready to evacuate 175 very sick children from Ghouta and 1,000 adults needing life-saving treatment. The UK could take them. Will the Government commit to doing that?

The EU is today announcing stronger sanctions on regime officials. Will we also impose sanctions on Russian individuals and companies involved in the conflict? Will we have the courage to recognise what is blindingly obvious—that for all the so-called agreement to new resolutions, the Security Council is broken while one of its permanent members flouts the basic laws and systems of order that it was created to uphold, and that, in these dreadful circumstances, being cowed into inaction by this strangulated body is a greater violation than seeking to act even without its authorisation? Will we work with any and all nations committed to returning humanity to Syria to consider the imposition of a no-fly zone over Ghouta, or for peacekeepers to allow aid to get in, or indeed, for strikes on the forces responsible for these atrocities, like we failed to authorise in 2013?

The men and women of Ghouta who lie in pieces, deliberately targeted by Assad’s Russia-enabled bombs, and the dead children whose faces are altered by the chlorine gas that choked them should not be strewn in the rubble of eastern Ghouta. Those bodies should be piled up in this Chamber and lain at the feet of Governments of every single nation that continues to shrug in the face of this horror.

My final question comes from a doctor in Ghouta who spoke to a British journalist yesterday, his voice apparently thick with exhaustion and resignation. He said:

“I have a question for the world. What number of victims does the world need to show responsibility. Its moral responsibility. Its legal responsibility. To stop these crimes.”

Boris Johnson: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the continuing and campaigning interest that he has shown in this matter. He speaks for many people in this country in his indignation and outrage at what is taking place.
Let me take some of his points in turn. On the evacuation of medical cases, particularly children, I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is in discussion about that very issue with David Nott, to whom the hon. Gentleman rightly alludes. On the point about holding the perpetrators to account and perhaps even bringing Russian agents to justice, we will certainly gather what evidence we can, knowing that the mills of justice may grind slowly, but they grind small. We will want in the end to bring all those responsible to justice.

On the hon. Gentleman’s central point that we in this country and in the west in the end did not do enough to turn the tide in Syria and that we missed our opportunity in 2013, no one can conceivably contradict him. We all understand what took place and the gap that we allowed in and support the Assad regime. We all understand the failure that took place then, but we also have to recognise that there is no military solution that we can impose. It is now essential that the Russians recognise that, just because Assad is in possession of half the territory of Syria, or perhaps 75% of the population of Syria, that does not mean that he has won. He has come nowhere near to a complete military victory and I do not believe that it is within his grasp to achieve a complete military victory. Nobody should be under the illusion that that is what will happen. Nobody should be under the illusion that the suffering of the people of eastern Ghouta is simply the sad prerequisite or precursor to an eventual Assad military victory. I do not believe that that is the case. I believe that it will prove almost impossible for the Assad regime to achieve a military victory, even with Russian and Iranian support.

The only way forward—the only way out of this mess and this morass—for the Russians is to go for a political solution. The Sochi experiment did not work. Now is the moment to encourage that regime to get down to genuine peace talks involving all non-jihadi parties and to allow civilian safe passage out of the city.

Mr Speaker: I call Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I was going to wait, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: That is very decent of the hon. Gentleman, but if he feels a question welling up in his breast, he should share it with the nation.

Tom Tugendhat: Many hon. Members wanted to ask questions early, so I was going to wait and allow them to do so.

Mr Speaker: We are saving the hon. Gentleman up for the edification of the House.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is correct in saying that, in the end, it will be a political and diplomatic solution, but do we not have a responsibility to demonstrate to the world that the use of chemical weapons will not be tolerated? At the very least, are limited strikes to deny the Assad regime the ability to continue this horror within our responsibility?

Boris Johnson: Many people in this country will share my hon. Friend’s sentiments, and many people will believe that the United States of America did exactly the right thing when it responded to the abomination of the attack at Khan Sheikhoun in April with the strike at the Shayrat airfield. If the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons produces incontrovertible evidence of the further use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime or its supporters, I would certainly hope very much that the west will not stand idly by.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for securing it.

During the Opposition day debate in the House a month ago, I warned of the Assad regime’s impending criminal assault on eastern Ghouta. Sadly, that is exactly what we have seen in recent weeks. Whatever words we use to describe the assaults, and even if we say, as UNICEF said last week, that there are simply no adequate words, one thing must be made clear: because of the indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas, the targeting of hospitals and medical centres, the use of starvation as a weapon of war, and the alleged use of chemical weapons, the assault is simply a war crime and there must be a reckoning for those responsible.

In the brief time I have, may I ask the Foreign Secretary three questions? First, all hon. Members welcome the UN Security Council statement calling for an immediate ceasefire, but it was clear to anyone reading the text with care that it in fact excluded military action against terrorists. That will allow Assad and his allies to justify continuing their assault against the jihadist armies of Jaysh al-Islam and Tahrir al-Islam inside eastern Ghouta. It will also allow Turkey to justify continuing its assault on Afrin. To stop the assault on eastern Ghouta, therefore, should the UN not instead be clear that there must be a temporary cessation of all military action within Syria, and not the conditional cessation that Assad and his allies are using to justify continuing their assault?

Secondly, I ask the Foreign Secretary what practical discussions there have been at the UN and elsewhere about opening a corridor from eastern Ghouta to Mleiha or Harasta, both to allow access for humanitarian relief and to allow civilian safe passage out of the city.

Finally, while I appreciate that it is the view of some in the House that the suffering of eastern Ghouta can be stopped only by yet more western military intervention, I believe that that would simply prolong and deepen the war. Ultimately, we can end this dreadful conflict and the suffering of all the Syrian people only through the agreement of a political solution, so may I ask the Foreign Secretary this: what is Britain doing to drive this process forward?

Boris Johnson: As I am sure the right hon. Lady will appreciate, United Nations Security Council resolution 2401 was, in fact, a considerable success of diplomacy, given the position that the Russians had previously taken. I think that it represents a strong commitment to a ceasefire on the part of the entire international community. It is now up to the Russians to enforce that ceasefire, and to get their client state to enforce it as well. That is
the point that we are making, and the point that we will definitely make to ambassador Yakovenko. As for the issue of humanitarian corridors, I think that all these ideas are extremely good and we certainly support them, but it will take the acquiescence of the Assad regime to achieve what we want.

The right hon. Lady asked about the UK Government. The UK Government have been in the lead in Geneva and the United Nations in driving the process of holding the Assad regime to account through Security Council resolutions, and we continue to do that. We are calling again for the Security Council to meet to discuss the failure to implement resolution 2401 today. As the right hon. Lady knows, the UK Government are part of the Syria Small Group, which is working to counterbalance what has turned out to be a doomed—or perhaps I should say “so far unsuccessful”—Russian venture at Sochi. That is because we think it is our job to bring the international community together. I am not talking about the Astana process or the Sochi process. We should bring the members of the international community together, as one, in Geneva, with a single political process. That is what the job of the UK Government is, and that is where we will continue to direct our efforts.

Mr Speaker: Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat: Thank you for your patience, Mr Speaker. I am extremely grateful.

I welcome my right hon. Friend’s response to the urgent question. May I share with him the disappointment that I am sure many Conservative Members feel as a war continues and Stop the War does not protest outside the Russian embassy, but stays silent about the brutality that we are seeing?

My right hon. Friend rightly said that Britain should be at the centre of this process. May I ask him what conversations he has had with Minister Zarif and Minister Lavrov over the last few days, given that Minister Lavrov was instrumental in first blocking and then delaying the UN process? May I also ask him whether it is true that both President Macron of France and Chancellor Merkel of Germany have spoken to President Putin of Russia? What contact have we had with Russia over the last few days?

Boris Johnson: I can certainly tell my hon. Friend that we are directing all our conversations and all our energies to getting the Russians to accept their responsibilities. I cannot go into the details of the contacts that we have had with them over the last few days, but suffice it to say that we believe that it is overwhelmingly in their interests to begin a political process. I feel that if they do not do that, they will be bogged down in this conflict for years, perhaps decades, to come. There is no military solution. There are 4 million people in Syria whom Assad does not control, and whom the Russians do not control either. We are therefore exerting all the influence we can to bring the process back to Geneva, where it belongs.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I thank the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for requesting it.

This is a multi-faceted war. Robert Fisk of The Independent has warned that it is Ghouta today, but it will be Raqqa later. We welcome the united approach of the UN Security Council to this critically urgent issue, and, indeed, the efforts of the UK Government in helping to secure it. However, there is concern about the fact that the resolution does not make it clear how the ceasefire will be enforced, how the injured will be evacuated, and how returning aid workers will be protected. Will the Foreign Secretary provide some clarity on that, and might he think about working to achieve an improved resolution?

We know that, yesterday, both Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron spoke to the Kremlin to urge Russia to use its influence to ensure the ceasefire is respected. Following on from the question of the Chairman of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), what representations are the UK Government planning to make to Russia to ensure the ceasefire is announced and, indeed, implemented, and especially for safe corridors, in which Russia could play a big part?

With Syria and Turkey now disagreeing over whether the ceasefire applies to Turkish forces in north-west Syria, and Iran insisting it does not apply to parts of Damascus, there is a real risk that the limited scope and clarity will lead to the ceasefire being disregarded. Can the Secretary of State confirm if there will be any further discussions aimed at ensuring there is zero ambiguity among all parties as to what the ceasefire entails, especially given Robert Fisk’s warning that the bombing in Ghouta will not end any time soon and, indeed, that there are other cities further down the line that will, when the dominoes start to topple, suffer the same fate?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the safe return of aid workers is paramount, and we are working with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development to ensure that that is possible and that people can go about their jobs looking after the humanitarian needs of the victims in safety. The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the need to bear down on Russia and make it clear to the world that Russia bears responsibility for bringing its client state to heel and delivering it to the talks in Geneva—and, as I have said many times to the House, that is pre-eminently in Russia’s interests.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that this ceasefire is absolutely vital not only to get humanitarian aid in, but to aid the medical evacuations across Syria and especially in eastern Ghouta?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and she will have heard the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) detail some of the suffering taking place in eastern Ghouta, including the signs that hundreds of children are victims, some of them perhaps now of chemical weapons. It is crucial that those victims receive the medical attention they need, and, as I told the House just now, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is working with the doctors concerned to see what we can do.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Russian Defence Minister has announced that, starting tomorrow, there will be a daily humanitarian pause from 9 o’clock in the morning until 2 o’clock in the afternoon, but does the Foreign Secretary agree that limiting the bombing
to 19 hours a day, as opposed to 24, will be of scant comfort to the residents of “hell on Earth”, as the Secretary-General of the United Nations has described eastern Ghouta? What further action is the Foreign Secretary prepared to take, above that which he has already described to the House, to ensure that Russia abides by the terms of the resolution it supported—a humanitarian pause for 30 consecutive days to ensure humanitarian aid gets in? Is not the reason we are having this discussion today that in the past the words of the west have failed to have any impact whatsoever?

**Boris Johnson:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I remember him making a passionate speech on that very subject. It is a great shame that at a critical moment this House did not give this country the authorisation to respond to the use of chemical weapons which we might otherwise have done. From that decision all sorts of consequences have flowed, and it has put Russia in the position it now finds itself in. The right hon. Gentleman is right that it is absurd for the Russians to say they are going to desist from bombing for a certain number of hours per day. There needs to be a complete ceasefire, there needs to be an end to the carnage in eastern Ghouta, and Russia needs to be held to account—and the Russians who are responsible for this will eventually be held to account, because we will make sure there is in the end some judicial process that allows us to hold those responsible for war crimes to account.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): This is the same neighbourhood where, following another chemical attack in 2013, President Obama rubbed out his own red line, and this place—wrongly in my view—turned its back and abandoned these people to their fate. When Russia breaks the terms of the resolution and when President Assad breaks international law and gasses his people again, both of which will happen, are we going to carry on with this merry dance and with warm, angry words and stomping our feet, or are we in this country eventually going to say that enough is enough and actually do something?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

**Boris Johnson:** When such questions are posed in this House, there is often cheering and noises of assent from the Benches on both sides, and I have to say that I share that sentiment. I would like to see us in a position to do something and not to allow the use of chemical weapons to go unpunished, but I remind the House of what happened in 2013 when we did have that choice. We had that option then, but we failed to take it. Let us not let the people of Syria down again.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): May I seek two points of clarity from the Foreign Secretary? He says that we must “bear down on Russia”. Can he tell us explicitly whether anyone from his Government has sought to contact President Putin directly about the situation in Ghouta? He also says that he has met his Turkish counterpart. Did he ask him explicitly about Operation Olive Branch, and did he discuss ensuring that, whatever the Turkish forces are doing, our Kurdish allies are able to receive aid?

**Boris Johnson:** Unfortunately, I am afraid that I cannot tell the hon. Lady about any contact between the US President and President Putin over the past few days. I certainly have not had any myself, but as I told the House, the Russian ambassador has been invited to come, and contact has certainly been made with Sergei Lavrov—[Interruption.] I will just make this point to the hon. Lady. In the end, there must be a political solution to this crisis, and it is up to the Russians to deliver their client. That is the best way forward.

Mr Bob Scell (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for bringing this urgent question to the House. As far back as 2017, the United Nations said that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons on more than two dozen occasions. Would my right hon. Friend now concede that, sadly, due to their regular use over the past few years, chemical munitions are now an accepted weapon of war in the modern era?

**Boris Johnson:** No, I do not think that anybody in this House would want to concede that. We do not concede that chemical weapons are an acceptable weapon of war, and we want those who use them to be held properly to account.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary said in response to a question from the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) that if there were further evidence of the use of chemical weapons, he hoped that we would not stand idly by. So why are we standing idly by while civilians are being slaughtered in their hundreds now, in flagrant breach of a binding United Nations resolution?

**Boris Johnson:** I do not believe that we are standing idly by. To say that we are doing so is to do a grave disservice to the work of the many hundreds of British people working in the Department for International Development and in our military who are doing all sorts of things on a budget of about £2.5 billion. We are the second biggest contributor to humanitarian relief in this area, and to say that we are doing nothing does a grave disservice to the efforts of this country. If the right hon. Gentleman is seriously advocating military intervention, which seems to be the position being taken up by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), he and the hon. Lady need to be clear about what they are advocating—[Interruption.] I have to say to the House that the last time military intervention was seriously proposed, a very modest proposal was put to the House and the House rejected it. If it is the view on the Labour Benches that Labour Members would now support military action—[Interruption.] They are making an awful lot of racket, but I am asking them a serious question. If it is their view that they would now support military action in Syria, I think they should be explicit about it—[Interruption.] They are chuntering away at me and accusing the UK of not doing anything in a way that I think is gravely disrespectful to the huge efforts that are being made by this Government.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the president of the Council of Europe recently had to resign due to a visit to see Assad without the Council’s knowledge and with the support of Russian MPs. What, if any, direct relationship should there now be with the Syrian regime?
Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend asks an excellent question about relations between the Council of Europe and the Syrian regime. I think there should be no such relations at the present time.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is crucial that those who commit international war crimes know that the world is watching and that we will not forget. What steps are being taken to ensure that careful records are kept of attacks on hospitals and other civilian infrastructure and of the indiscriminate killing of women, men and children, so that the perpetrators of such crimes can ultimately be held to account?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Lady asks an important question. As I said to the House, careful records and tabulations are being made of exactly what is happening with a view to holding the perpetrators to account.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The overwhelming majority of abuses in Syria have been committed by the Assad regime and his backers. Will the Foreign Secretary assure us that everything will be done to ensure that those who flout international law and human rights laws will be held properly to account?

Boris Johnson: We will certainly do everything we can both to gather the evidence that is necessary and to hold the perpetrators to account.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is good that the UN Security Council has passed a resolution, but why should President Assad fear the Security Council? What will it do to enforce the resolution?

Boris Johnson: The answer has already been given several times in the House this afternoon: the greatest fear and constraint upon Bashar al-Assad and other members of the Assad regime are the eventual consequences that they will face in terms of prosecution for war crimes.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Meanwhile, just up the road in Afrin, our friends the Kurdish peshmerga, without whom we would not have been able to defeat ISIS, are being backed by Assad’s military forces against a Turkish invasion. Whose side are we on there?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I neglected to answer that part of the question from the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). We view the Turkish incursion into Afrin with grave concern. Everybody understands Turkey’s feelings about the YPG and the PKK, and everybody understands Turkey’s legitimate need to protect its own security. However, we do have concerns about the humanitarian consequences in Afrin, which I raised with my Turkish counterpart yesterday morning. We are also concerned about the possibility, which seems to be happening, of the diversion of Kurdish fighters, who have been so effective against Daesh, from the eastern part of Syria back to Afrin and the Manbij gap area to take on the Turks. We simply do not welcome that diversion in the fight against Daesh.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Last week, I met with Dr Ahmad Tarakji, the president of the Syrian American Medical Society, which is supporting the last doctors left in eastern Ghouta, where the bereft people are being bombed, besieged and starved into submission. When the International Development Secretary discusses the doctors in eastern Ghouta, will she also undertake to channel funding into SAMS? It exists on $35 million a year, which is tiny in DFID’s funding landscape, and those doctors are the last human rights defenders in eastern Ghouta. We are funding the White Helmets, so why are we not funding SAMS?

Boris Johnson: That is an excellent question. As I am sure the hon. Lady knows, the SAMS hospital is where we received the evidence of children arriving with symptoms as though they had been poisoned with chlorine gas, so we applaud and support the work of SAMS. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has told me that we will certainly look at what we can do to fund SAMS.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s statement. In 1995, in relation to the Srebrenica massacre and genocide, the international community authorised international humanitarian military action. Will he clarify whether a similar threshold has now been met in relation to taking action in Syria? If so, it is now for the international community to decide whether or not it wants to take that decisive action.

Boris Johnson: The concept of international humanitarian military action, as was employed after Srebrenica, is certainly one that many people have considered. In all candour, I must say to the House that we are not at that point at the moment. I appreciate very much the sincerity of the demands from Opposition Members, if I have understood their sentiments correctly, for a more robust military posture, with airstrikes perhaps—I do not know quite what is being recommended—but I would be misleading the House if I said there is a strong will in the international community to engage in quite that way. In response to the individual use of chemical weapons perhaps, but not a sustained military engagement.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary has rightly said that trying to sort this out will involve getting the Russians to bring their clients, the Syrians, to the peace negotiation table, and we seem a very long way from that. Given its importance, will he tell the House whether the Prime Minister has talked to President Putin to express our strong wish in this country that that should happen?

Boris Johnson: As I am sure the hon. Lady knows very well, the Prime Minister is in regular contact with President Putin of Russia and has repeatedly made clear the view of the British Government that there is only one way forward, which is for the Russians to put pressure on the Assad regime to get to the negotiating table. I think that view may at last be gaining ground in Russia, because the Kremlin has no easy way out of this morass.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Foreign Secretary has noticed that the very fact a ceasefire in eastern Ghouta on humanitarian grounds has been
announced in Moscow says it all for who exactly is pulling the strings in this situation, and who should be taking responsibility for the slaughter. Does he agree it is vital that the UK Government, along with their allies, work to ensure that the resolution is fully implemented, and not just for five hours a day?

Boris Johnson: The House has spoken as one on that matter this afternoon, and that is what we will continue to convey to Moscow.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary just said that the Prime Minister has regular discussions with President Putin, but has she had recent discussions with President Putin, as we know full well that both President Macron and Chancellor Merkel have? If the Prime Minister has not, both sides of the House urge her to have those urgent conversations.

Boris Johnson: I will, of course, make sure that the views of the House are communicated to the Prime Minister. I can tell the hon. Lady that the Prime Minister has regular contact with her Russian counterpart and has repeatedly made that point.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Given the slaughter in eastern Ghouta, and given the regret expressed on both sides of the House, including by the Foreign Secretary, does he not agree that the time is long overdue that we urgently review how this House makes different sorts of decisions about intervention and about what sorts of intervention to take?

Boris Johnson: If the hon. Lady is saying that she would like the right to approve such interventions to be once again taken back by the Executive and not necessarily to be a matter for the House of Commons, that is a very interesting point of view.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Three years ago, the YPG and the YPJ had already defended Kabone against the better-armed Daesh forces and took the fight to Raqqa and won. Why are the British Government now effectively supporting a similar brutal offensive by the Turkish army against those same Kurdish forces in Afrin province? Has it got anything to do with the recent £100 million fighter jet deal signed by Turkey and British arms exporters? Will the Foreign Secretary today call for a de-escalation zone in this part of Syria?

Boris Johnson: If the hon. Lady is saying that she must correct the way the hon. Gentleman has expressed it. The UK is not effectively supporting the Turkish incursion in Afrin. As I said to my Turkish counterpart yesterday, we have grave reservations about humanitarian suffering and the consequences for the struggle against Daesh.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary attempted to make party political points earlier on. May I just ask him to go back and read a previous Foreign Secretary’s answers to me and other Members—some on his own Benches—calling for no-fly zones and humanitarian corridors at the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012? His Government—the coalition Government—refused intervention at that time. Is it not a fact that the Russians are in the dominant position they are now because people failed to support the democratic and, at that time, peaceful Syrian opposition?

Boris Johnson: Of course I mean absolutely no disrespect to the hon. Gentleman, who, in common with Members on this side of the House and from across the House, took a different view in 2013—on the other hand, that was not the prevailing view. I seem to recall, unless my memory fails me, that it was the then leader of the Labour party who took a contrary view. As a result of that decision, we see this particular political conjuncture in Syria, in which Russia, as Members from across the House have said, has the dominant role.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): One of the agitators in the region is Iran. What engagement has the Foreign Secretary had with his Iranian colleagues in order to try to find a way through this crisis?

Boris Johnson: I spoke to my Iranian counterpart on Friday, I believe it was, about what Iran could do, both in the Syrian theatre and in the region more widely, to promote the cause of peace. I hope that the Iranians will use their considerable influence to do that.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The pro-Assad media organisation al-Watan yesterday reported, unequivocally, that Russian jets were involved in striking targets in Ghouta. Is it the Foreign Secretary’s understanding that in recent days Russian jets have struck targets and broken the ceasefire that the Security Council called for just on Saturday, in its resolution?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that information. I have to say it would be shocking if the Russians were to be convicted in the eyes of world opinion of breaking the ceasefire that they signed up to in New York. I will study the evidence that he has cited and we will certainly be putting it to the Russians.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary is right in one regard: this is an amoral Russian leadership backing this immoral and wicked Government in Syria. But he is missing one point: the Russians are particularly vulnerable on one count. I refer not to bombing them, but to economic sanctions. The word from the American Treasury and from many Americans is that Europe and Britain have gone soft on sanctions. We need Russia to be totally isolated by the toughest sanctions that this world has ever known. Will he renew sanctions of an extreme kind?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Gentleman will know very well that it is actually the UK that is in the lead in the EU in calling for Russia to be held to account, not just for Ukraine, but for what it is doing in Syria.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary said that there can be no military victory in eastern Ghouta, but I fear that Russia, Iran and Assad are not looking for that sort of military victory. They are looking to weaken resistance and instil fear and tension—not only in the middle east but in north Africa.
and eastern Europe—and to build a cadre of battle-hardened troops and proven military weapons so that they can impose their order on the rest of the world. Does the Foreign Secretary accept that?

**Boris Johnson:** That may indeed be their ambition, but they have not an earthly chance of achieving it.

**Mrs Moon:** They are achieving it!

**Boris Johnson:** Well, as I told the House, there are still substantial numbers of people in Syria—around 4 million, which is around a quarter of the population—who are not under the regime’s control. Furthermore, the hon. Lady should remember that the Assad regime is basically a minority regime that seeks to impose itself on a Sunni majority in the country. It is sowing the seeds of its own destruction by its continued brutality. It is not a strategy that can work in the long term, which is why a political process has to begin now.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): On Friday, I was pressed by the Afrin diaspora in my constituency about the Turkish bombardment and invasion. I understand that today President Macron picked up the phone and spoke to President Erdoğan to remind him that the humanitarian truce applies. From what the Foreign Secretary has said, though, I am still not clear what representations Her Majesty’s Government or the Prime Minister have made to President Erdoğan to underline that the truce does apply.

**Boris Johnson:** I remind the hon. Gentleman of what I think I said pretty clearly to the House just now. Yesterday morning, at my initiative, I had a long conversation with my Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, about what is happening in Afrin, the suffering that is taking place there and the UK Government’s strong desire that restraint should be shown— notwithstanding Turkey’s security concerns, which we all understand—and that the primary focus should be on the political process in Geneva and on the defeat of Daesh.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): It is now nearly five years since the then American Secretary of State and Russian Foreign Minister came to an agreement about the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria. What further diplomatic steps can the Foreign Secretary take to ensure that that happens, including by securing better access for representatives of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons?

**Boris Johnson:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, after the Khan Shaykhun episode and the work of the joint investigative mechanism to establish almost certainly the culprits behind that chemical weapons attack, Russia has, alas, vetoed any further such activity by the OPCW. Again, it comes back to the Russians and the question that they must ask themselves, which is what kind of international actor they want to be and how they want to be regarded by the world.

**Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary has said that a peaceful solution is possible if the political will exists. What if the political will does not exist? If chemical attacks, including the use of chlorine gas after a ceasefire, are not this country’s red line, will he tell us what is?

**Boris Johnson:** I do not wish to go back over the points that I have already made this afternoon about the red line that was, alas, crossed in 2013. Where there is incontrovertible evidence of chemical weapons attacks by the Syrian regime, with the connivance of the Russians, then—to answer the question that has been posed many times—the people responsible for those attacks should be held to account. By the way, it was as a result of UK lobbying and the activities of this Government that after the Khan Shaykhun attack we listed several members of the Assad military and imposed new sanctions on Syria. That is the way forward. To get to the question asked by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), in the end it will be the fear of prosecution, sanctions and being prosecuted for war crimes that will have the most powerful effect on the imagination of these individuals.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I agree entirely with the Foreign Secretary that we must aim for a political solution. Do today’s revelations in the media that we have spent more on our air campaign in the region than we have on humanitarian aid in both Syria and Iraq during the same period show that we should put our money where our mouth is and prioritise aid, sanctions and peace negotiations, not a costly air campaign next door that does not seem to be working?

**Boris Johnson:** Much as I admire the hon. Gentleman’s idealism, I must respectfully disagree with him. I believe that our military campaign has been highly effective in removing Daesh from Raqqa and Mosul. It was invaluable. The UK had the second biggest number of missions in the air campaign, as the House will know, and it was crucial that we did that. At the same time, as I have said to many hon. Members, we should not neglect the towering work of our humanitarian aid workers. We support the White Helmets very generously, for example, and they have saved 100,000 lives, which is something in which the people of this country can take a great deal of pride. Britain is leading in the humanitarian effort in Syria.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In the last decade of bloodshed and tragedy in Syria, we have seen that the old adage that the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must holds true today. The latest machination of that has the UN warning that civilians in Afrin are effectively trapped by the ongoing violence. If the Foreign Secretary will not urge his Turkish colleagues to stop the violence altogether, can he not, as an immediate step, urge them to open up corridors to a safety zone that can be guaranteed by the NATO alliance?

**Boris Johnson:** We certainly have urged our Turkish counterparts to do everything they can to minimise humanitarian suffering, and I will study the proposal the hon. Gentleman makes.
Points of Order

4.32 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the Foreign Secretary's contributions, he suggested that in my contribution to the urgent question I had called for military intervention in Ghouta. Actually, I simply called for him to pick up the phone to the Russian president. I wonder if there is a way to correct the record to make it clear what I said.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has found her own salvation. The Foreign Secretary is nodding approvingly from a sedentary position, which I think is confirmation that he accepts the truth of what the hon. Lady has said. There is a satisfactory conclusion, and I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary. He may come to the Dispatch Box if he wishes.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Further to that point of order, I am happy to accept the hon. Lady's assurances that she was not in fact calling for military intervention.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. From memory, I think the record will confirm that the hon. Lady was not advocating that. I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I was disgusted on Wednesday when someone, consumed with hatred, tried to pull off the turban of one of my Sikh guests, as he queued up outside our Parliament buildings, and shouted “Muslim, go back home.” It has been brought to the Government's attention on previous occasions that the hate crime action plan to properly record and monitor hate crimes completely ignores Sikhs. The Sikhs regard the turban as a crown on their heads. Indeed, Mr Speaker, when you presided over the launch of the national Sikh war memorial campaign, for which I am extremely grateful, you will have ascertained the substantial strength of feeling in the community about the need for a statue of turbaned Sikh soldiers in our capital. More than 80,000 turbaned individuals died for the freedom of this country—our country.

Given that considerable context, Mr Speaker, when giving your advice, perhaps you would be kind enough to impress on the House authorities and the police the need to take this matter very seriously and to bring the assailant to justice.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courtesy in offering me advance notice of his intention to raise it. First, let me take this opportunity from the Chair to empathise with the hon. Gentleman and all decent people across the country. It was a truly appalling incident. The act can have been perpetrated in our country. The hon. Gentleman's friend and visitor to Parliament must have been very shaken by his experience. The act can have been motivated only by hatred, ignorance or—more likely—an extremely regrettable combination of the two. The matter is under active consideration by the police. It would therefore be inappropriate for me to comment in detail upon it. In any case, I would not be able to do myself, although I have received a report of the incident.

Let me make it absolutely clear that I take the matter extremely seriously, as, I am sure, do the House authorities. It is absolutely imperative that visitors to this place are—to the best of our ability and that of the police and security staff here—safe from physical attack and abuse. Moreover, I say to the hon. Gentleman, that if I am provided with an address, I would like to write, on behalf of the House, to the hon. Gentleman's visitor to express our regret about the attack that he experienced. I think that we will have to leave it there for today, but I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the matter.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There is a convention in this House when a Member of Parliament visits someone else's constituency that they should write to them, informing them that they have done so. Many Members of Parliament from England may have stayed and dined—or, indeed, drowned their sorrows—in my constituency on Saturday, after the rugby. Now, I do not really want them all to write to me, but I wondered whether there was a mechanism to find out who they were so that I could write to them in order to remind them of the convention, and also maybe to just about gloat about Scotland's Calcutta cup success on Saturday.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I hope that I have not brought on a trickle, still less a flood. I was admiring the forbearance and courtesy of the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). I hope that he is enjoying his day, possibly more than I have been enjoying mine.

BILL PRESENTED

DOMESTIC GAS AND ELECTRICITY (TARIFF CAP) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Greg Clark, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Secretary Chris Grayling, Secretary Michael Gove, Andrea Leadsom and Claire Perry, presented a Bill to make provision for the imposition of a cap on rates charged to domestic customers for the supply of gas and electricity; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 168) with explanatory notes (Bill 168-EN).
Estimates Day
[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2017-18
Ministry of Defence


Mr Speaker: I should inform colleagues that, following recommendations by the Procedure Committee, this year the subjects for the estimates debate have been chosen by the Backbench Business Committee based on bids from Members. The subjects chosen by the Backbench Business Committee were then recommended to the Liaison Committee, which in turn, under Standing Order No. 145, recommended them to the House, which agreed to them on 22 February. Needless to say, I am sure that all colleagues present are intimately conscious of this chronology of events, of which I am merely serving to remind them. We will start with the motion on the chronology of events, of which I am merely serving to

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Ministry of Defence:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £8,852,638,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,363,500,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,703,385,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(Mr Ellwood.)

4.40 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This is the first proper departmental estimates debate, thanks to the Procedure Committee and the Backbench Business Committee. In our 2012 report to the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, “Options to Improve Parliamentary Scrutiny of Government Expenditure”, Dr John Pugh, who was then a Member of Parliament, and I included a recommendation to introduce additional estimates days on subjects to be suggested by a budget committee that we also proposed to create. Dr Pugh decided to test this matter by trying to talk on the subject of estimates on estimates days. He was ruled out of order by your Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker, despite speaking about estimates on estimates days.

The reason we are here today is thanks to the work of the Procedure Committee, which I had the privilege of serving on in the previous Parliament.

Mr Speaker: Of which the hon. Gentleman was, I think I can fairly say, a distinguished ornament.

Sir Edward Leigh: I put it to the Procedure Committee, and it recommended to the Backbench Business Committee, that we take on the role of determining estimates to be debated on estimates days. Scrutiny of the Government’s supply estimates was listed under “unfinished business” at the end of the previous Parliament. It is thanks to the current Committee and its Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), that this business is no longer unfinished and we have now decided to debate estimates on estimates days. It is quite shocking how little power or influence the House of Commons has over spending in the estimates procedure, with a budget of some £800 billion a year. We have one of the best post-hoc systems in the world, through the Public Accounts Committee. We have one of the weakest systems in the world in terms of parliamentary scrutiny of what we are planning to spend, not of what we have spent.

Estimates days, as they have existed, have borne little relation to the actual content of the departmental estimates. Let me give a little bit of history, which is always interesting. This debate has gone on for quite a long time. In 1911, the then Clerk of the House, Sir Courtenay Ilbert, said:

“The sittings of the committee of supply continue through the greater part of the session, and, under existing standing orders, at least twenty days must be set apart for this purpose”.

Already, estimates days were just being used as a kind of general critique of government rather than actually to deal with what we were going to spend. Another report, in 1981, said:

“By 1966 there was a considerable discrepancy between the theory of supply procedure, under which individual estimates were put down for detailed consideration at regular intervals, and the practice, under which supply days were used by the opposition to discuss topics of their choice”,

which often had little, if anything, to do with the votes concerned. Indeed, the Clerk Assistant told the House that by the 1960s more and more supply day procedures had gone through which were “Little short of farcical”. I am glad that thanks to the Procedure Committee, and all the work that has been done and the debates that we have had, we are now going to talk about money.

However, given that the Government intend this parliamentary Session to last for two years, the already insufficient allocation of days for estimates days is doubly inadequate. Overall, in the past 100 years the House of Commons has delegated its role to the Treasury. We in this Chamber should be doing more. Why should we leave it just to unelected civil servants to debate what we spend and how we allocate spending among Government Departments? This House is asked to approve Executive spending even though we are not given much clarity about what that spending is expected to deliver, nor indeed the means to influence spending levels or priorities. As long ago as 1999, the Procedure Committee said that “when motions are directed to future plans, motions recommending that ‘in the opinion of the House’ increases in expenditure or transfers between certain budgets are desirable, should be permissible.” I believe that Select Committees should have stronger powers to investigate and scrutinise public spending. In Australia, Select Committees also sit as estimates committees, with Ministers and departmental body heads
appearing before MPs or Senators to justify their spending. In other Commonwealth countries, quite a lot of work has been done on this. For instance, in several other countries with public financial management systems that are based on the British system, estimates include spending information at a programme level, with past spending information for each programme and medium-term estimates of the cost of the programme covering the Budget year and at least two further years. Good estimates help us to understand the link between Government priorities, desired impacts and the contribution of programmes to them.

There is still a lot of work to do. I would have thought that parliamentary scrutiny of the Budget was at the very heart of this body’s raison d’être. We have fought wars on this very subject yet are not particularly bothered by the comparatively little scrutiny we have of Government spending. Debates such as this one will, I hope, encourage broader participation of Members of this House in the formal budgetary process. We have a range of experience and points of view. I hope that this use of the debate to look at the Ministry of Defence estimates might also encourage us to have a more substantial debate on defence in general.

When I saw that at last we were going to get this estimates day debate, I approached my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, because I thought there was no better subject than defence to lead off on in discussing Government spending on an estimates day. That is why we are here, and this is a real opportunity. I will now talk a little bit about defence, although I recognise that there are people who are far more expert than me in this Chamber.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and thank him for achieving this debate. Is he surprised and disappointed that the Secretary of State is not here to respond? We are very much aware, through the press, that the Secretary of State is not here to respond. Is he surprised and disappointed that the Secretary of State appears to be pushing for greater budgets for defence regardless, in order to keep with up that target. That is the challenge we face.

Sir Edward Leigh: Well, I think it is very nice that we have such an impressive Minister as the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), sitting in front of us.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): On that introduction, how could I fail to get to my feet? The Defence Secretary sends his apologies. He is with the Prime Minister, telling her what he is doing, which I think is appropriate, given the challenges on finances that we face.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am grateful for that.

Given our commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence, as is required of NATO members, which most NATO countries ignore, we will have to spend more on defence regardless, in order to keep up that target. That is the challenge we face.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for the way he has introduced the debate. Of course it is important that we scrutinise the estimates, but we need substantial amounts of money to consider. Does he share my concern about a lack of amphibious capacity, which could reduce our capacity to carry out humanitarian missions, for example?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is an extremely good point, and if I have time I will deal with amphibious capacity later in my speech.

This is a real challenge. As Professor Malcolm Chalmers, deputy director-general of the Royal United Services Institute, pointed out in his evidence to the Defence Committee:

“While the MoD budget is set to grow by 0.5 per cent per annum over the next five years, national income (GDP) is projected to grow by an average of 2.4 per cent per annum over the same period.”

That means that the current Government commitments to defence spending imply that UK defence expenditure will fall from 2.8% of GDP in 2015-16 to 1.85% in 2020-21. I believe that Ministers need to come clean and make it clear whether they intend to abandon the 2% commitment, as seems to be the case.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He says that the Government are committed to a 0.5% increase, but does he agree that that is just on equipment, not personnel? Something like 55% of the budget goes on daily running costs and people, and that will be completely constrained if no new cash is put into the people side of the budget.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is an extremely good point, and I will come on to deal with the people side.

As the Defence Committee has pointed out, there appear to be some shenanigans going on in relation to how we reach the 2% target, and this is a really good opportunity for us to discuss money in detail and for the Minister to reply to these points. The criteria seem to change from year to year, with new bits—war pensions and other expenditure—qualifying when they have not previously done so. NATO is apparently satisfied, but this rather gives the impression that we are meeting our targets only by means of creative accounting, and when it comes to the defence of the realm, surely creative accounting is not good enough.

Let me say a word about procurement. What are our procurement procedures, and are we getting value for money? Professor Julian Lindley French testified, again to the Defence Committee:

“If you look at the $90 billion being spent by the Russians as part of their modernisation programme, the $150 billion or so being spent by the Chinese and what other countries around the world are doing, what strikes me is how few assets—both platforms and systems—the UK gets for its money.”

As a former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, I am talking not just about more money for the MOD, but about spending the money more wisely.

The MOD committed itself to new purchases arising from its 2015 strategic defence and security review before it established how they could be paid for. This requires the MOD to generate £5.8 billion of new savings from within the defence equipment plan itself,
in addition to £1.5 billion from the wider defence budget, which is already under pressure. We never of course know what crisis may happen, and if a crisis happens and our troops have to be deployed, where will the money come from? In such a case, will we end up taking money from procurement that we had not expected to take?

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way on that very important point and for his excellent introduction to the debate. Does he recognise the issue of the defence inflation rate, which in recent years has been 3.9%, while background inflation has been just 0.8%, leading to a real depreciation in real purchasing power for defence? Is that not the root cause of the problems we are seeing with the attrition of defence capability?

Sir Edward Leigh: That point on purchasing power is a very pertinent one. I hope that the Minister replies to it, because it is a point well made.

Uncertainties and over-optimism—there is over-optimism—in the project costs mean that the final costs of the defence equipment plan may be significantly understated. The MOD’s cost assurance and analysis service reported that the costs in the 2016 plan were understated by £4.8 billion. Over a period of years, the MOD has failed to agree a workable way forward with the prime contractor on the procurement of a Type 26 warship, which has compromised maritime capability and placed further upward pressure on costs.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Does he see the recently announced combat air strategy as a similar sort of programme, and what might its impact be on procurement?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a good point. Again, I hope the Minister replies to it. It may be a case of when times change, procurement policies change, but will that result in more pressure? What I am saying—several Members, particularly my hon. Friend, have made this point in their interventions—is that the defence equipment plan has no leeway to cope with new equipment requirements resulting from emerging threats. As the National Audit Office’s investigation of the plan put it:

“The Department’s Equipment Plan is not affordable. It does not provide a realistic forecast of the costs of buying and supporting the equipment that the Armed Forces will need over the next 10 years.”

If it does not do so, what is it for? The NAO continues:

“If the Department takes urgent action to close the gap in affordability, it will find that spending on equipment can only be made affordable by reducing the scope of projects”.

We have had training exercises cancelled, and we know that soldiers, sailors and airmen need to keep active so that they are fully trained and at the ready. Cancelling training exercises is short-sighted and a false economy. Just to be fair for a moment to the MOD and the pressures it is facing, we are not the only ones having problems. Documents linked to Die Welt newspaper show that the German military has secretly admitted that it cannot fulfil its NATO obligations. The Bundeswehr was due to take over the rotating lead of NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, but despite committing 44 Leopard 2 battle tanks to the force, it was revealed that only nine are operational. It begins to look as though the arrangements for the conventional defence of Europe are a bit of a shambles.

The reality is that we are underspending, just as we did in the lead-up to the second world war. Back then, we were capable of jump-starting and expanding our defence capabilities because we faced an existential threat. God willing, we will not face that kind of threat in the coming years, though we can never rule out the possibility.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): One of the problems with being in a NATO alliance—I know this as a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly—is that there is nowhere to hide from our allies, and allies are noticing that Britain is withdrawing from exercises. They are concerned because they have seen Britain as an ally on which they could rely and depend. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the most worrying things is the lack of credibility of our armed forces—valiant though they may be—because of the cuts we face in expenditure?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a very good point. With France, and after America, we are the leading military power in Europe and we have to set an example. If we withdraw from exercises, that creates a bad impression.

I am glad to see that the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) is here. He introduced his Backbench Business debate on defence last month and pointed out that the risks this country faces are only intensifying. If we face a multiplicity and variety of threats, surely our capabilities must reflect that. Russia is indeed a threat again, because it realised that the only way to be taken seriously is to be seen to be a threat. We treated Russia with contempt during the 1990s and it has drawn the lesson. It is a geopolitical gamble that we may not approve of, but in terms of Russian influence it has paid off. What have we been talking about for the past hour except Russia? According to some estimates, its economy’s GDP is equivalent to that of Italy or even that of Australia. Russia’s emphasis on its defence spending has made it an extremely important geopolitical player. Although we are constantly told that times have changed and that defence spending is not as important as it was, perhaps the Russian example shows that defence spending does pay off. I am not for one moment defending or approving of Russia or anything it does, but it has drawn the obvious lessons from the 1990s. There is a threat from Russia and we need to take it seriously.

Surely one lesson we can draw from the past, particularly from the lead-up to the second world war, is that, in terms of commitments, we must have a real presence. There is no point in our having a token commitment to presence in the Baltic states; we need a real presence. France, and after America, we are the leading military power in Europe and we have to set an example. If we withdraw from exercises, that creates a bad impression.

Many other threats are developing from Russia, the Chinese and other potential opponents: cyber-attacks and information warfare are all potential threats.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman rightly identifies the potential difficulties on the north European plain. Should not the Ministry of Defence therefore reconsider its decision to withdraw from north Germany and reinstate our capability there?
Sir Edward Leigh: Yes, I certainly think it should reconsider it. All the old, conventional threats are still very real and require conventional responses. We have to maintain our original capabilities while also expanding and improving them.

On the range of capabilities, last year Hurricane Irma wreaked devastation in the Caribbean, and HMS Ocean was a key element in our response to that tragedy. Now, apparently we have sold HMS Ocean to the Brazilians, but we have a proud humanitarian tradition on these islands and it is our duty to maintain it. This is not just about responding to threats; it is also about our humanitarian duty. We have direct responsibility for our overseas territories and bonds of close friendship with other members of the Commonwealth.

Ministers have so far refused to commit to keeping HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, which give our armed forces an amphibious landing capability, as the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) said in an earlier intervention. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) pointed out last month that “40% of the world’s population live within 100 km of the coast”. —[Official Report, 11 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 516.]

I voted against the Iraq war, but the fact remains that we made a very effective contribution with our amphibious invasion of the al-Faw peninsula in 2003. I may not always be in favour of using military options, but I want, and the British people demand, that we have as many options on the table as we can and that we maintain our capabilities.

Meanwhile, there are proposals to cut the Royal Marines, some of our most useful, well-trained, high-quality and greatly effective troops. The variety of roles they can undertake underpins the ability of Great Britain to project our military power. As I will mention in a moment, this has led to low morale and a culture of fear for the future in one of the most important and valuable parts of our military.

Then there is the Navy. I received an email—one of many that have been sent to many Members from all sorts of sources—from a former Army major, writing to me through “gritted teeth”:

“the area of defence that has been shockingly neglected is the Royal Navy. Put Trident to one side and disregard the vanity project that is HMS Queen Elizabeth and you have virtually no ships. The Royal Navy has to be the most important service for an invasion of the al-Faw peninsula in 2003. I may not always be in favour of using military options, but I want, and the British people demand, that we have as many options on the table as we can and that we maintain our capabilities.

I agree with that. In December 2017, all six of our Type 45 destroyers were laid up in Portsmouth, whether for repairs, equipment failures, routine maintenance or manpower shortages. The possibility of a significant crisis requiring a naval deployment catching us not ready is strong—too strong.

Toby Perkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. He is absolutely right. In December 2017, not only were none of our destroyers out, but, as revealed by an answer to my parliamentary question, for the first time in history not a single Royal Navy frigate or destroyer was deployed overseas. That demonstrates powerfully the scale of the pressure on our Royal Navy and its lack of capability.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a very good point and that was a worrying incident.

On recruitment and numbers, the Public Accounts Committee “Army 2020” report notes that “the Army’s recruiting partner, Capita, missed its regular soldier recruitment target by 30% in 2013-14 and it recruited only around 2,000 reserves against a target of 6,000. A huge step-up in performance is required if the Army is to hit its ambitious target of recruiting 9,270 new reserves in 2016-17. The size of the regular Army is reducing faster than originally planned but the size of the trained Army reserve has not increased in the last two years because more people have left the reserve than joined.”

We have shifted from an emphasis on the Regular Army to one that includes a very strong Army reserve. All the same, we still need a Regular Army, but we are not meeting targets for that either. Our force strength numbers are not up to scratch. In April 2016, we were short by 5,750 personnel. A year later, that had increased to over 6,000. By August 2017, it was over 7,000 and the latest statistics available show our armed forces are short of their full strength by 8,160 men. The problem is getting worse.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend highlights a very important point. What I cannot understand is why it takes the best part of a year for someone to be able to join the armed forces. Surely that should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Sir Edward Leigh: There is clearly a problem, one I hope the Minister will deal with later. Why does it take so long to recruit? Are we putting off potential recruits with our very slow processes?

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Just before my hon. Friend moves on from the issue of recruitment, does he agree that the performance of the Capita recruitment partnering project contract has been distinctly sub-optimal, and that if this continues for very much longer the Ministry of Defence would be wise to seek an alternative?

Sir Edward Leigh: My right hon. Friend is of course a former Minister for the Armed Forces and really does know what he is talking about. The Government should listen to him.

There is a problem with morale. Those who perceive service morale as low increased by 12% on the previous year in the Army and 15% in the Royal Marines in 2017. The overwhelming majority, 74%, feel proud to serve—we are proud of them for feeling proud to serve—but only a third feel valued by their service. What is the point of training men and women if we fail to keep them?

Mr Sweeney: On retention, the hon. Gentleman referred to the reservists and the recruitment challenges that they face. My infantry battalion—a reserve battalion—has seen a significant influx of former regular soldiers echeloning through from the Regular Army as it has been severely downsized, including by, in effect, the disbanding of an entire battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland. The concern is how long these former regular soldiers will remain reservists before they move out altogether, because they have benefited from a transition payment. Could that financial incentive just be temporary, and will we see a further pressure on reserve recruitment in the longer term?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a fair point. Pressures build on pressures.
In conclusion, the problems are many, but they must be tackled head on. Speaking personally, my record on spending and saving is clear: I think that the state should spend as little as possible. However, we also have responsibilities of absolute necessity, such as the defence of the realm. It is not pompous to say that—it is an absolute fact. That is the first responsibility of what we do in this House and we are failing short. The Government simply have to commit to spending more if we are to have the armed forces that this country requires. In order to maintain our independence—not just our sovereignty, but our freedom of action and ability to make our own decisions rather than be dictated to by circumstances—we need highly trained, fully manned, well-equipped armed forces. For a trading island nation on the cusp of Brexit and turning her face to the world, Great Britain must turn the tide of decline in defence.

I hope that this debate will prove to be a turning point, but that is up to the Government to decide. One thing is sure: further stagnation and cutting capabilities will set us back further. Once again, I am reminded of the wise words of Admiral Andrew Cunningham during the battle of Crete. Exposed to German air assault, his ships were taking heavy losses as they helped to evacuate the Army from Crete to Egypt. Some suggested that he should suspend the Navy’s part in the evacuation, saving his ships but ending the tradition of solidarity under fire among the armed forces. Cunningham knew that the Navy must not let the Army down and he refused. He said these words:

“It takes three years to build a ship, but it takes three centuries to build a tradition. The evacuation will continue.”

Our traditions of a great nation and great armed forces must continue. That is why this important debate must continue, too.

5.7 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the fantastic overview that the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) set out of the defence estimates. For Members who do not find themselves—as many of us do—becoming defence-obessed, due to our concerns at the lack of funding being sent into the defence of this wonderful realm, it was a fantastic primer on the concerns that we must face as a country.

I want to look at the reserve forces, an area that the hon. Gentleman also raised. I declare a sort of interest as the chair of the all-party group on reserves and cadets. I recently met an academic from the University of Bath, Dr Patrick Bury, who has been looking at the progress of the Future Reserves 2020 plan, the main purpose of which was to provide direct support to a reduced Army and to increase the reserves to 35,000. Following the meeting, I rather upset a Minister in the Ministry of Defence, who received more than 100 parliamentary questions in the lead-up to Christmas. He took me aside to remonstrate with me for giving him so much work. I pointed out that if he had answered some of the questions the first time around, there might have been 50% less questions, but that is the way of asking and pursuing parliamentary questions.

The information I will speak to in today’s debate is all provided—sometimes reluctantly, but it was provided eventually—by the Ministry of Defence following parliamentary questions. I am deeply concerned that the expenses involved in Future Reserves 2020 not only show a programme that is struggling to achieve its goals, but are such that we need either to redefine or to look at whether the money we are spending, given the outcomes we are achieving, would be better spent elsewhere. We all know that the Ministry of Defence cannot afford to waste that expense. Every penny counts in the Ministry of Defence.

To provide context and make the costs clear, what is the current reserve structure? The reserve model means that Army reservists sign a contract in which they commit to achieving a certain amount of training time, and to achieving training targets over a financial year. That involves 27 days’ training, including a two-week continuous period away, which is known as annual camp. If the reservists achieve that commitment, they are considered to be fully trained and up to date, and ready to fulfil their role in supporting the Regular Army—in other words, they are deployable—and are rewarded with a tax-free bounty cash payment.

It goes without saying that, for a reservist to achieve a high level of practice and well-honed skills, they would need to achieve that minimum level of training. It is only 27 days. Many members of the armed forces parliamentary scheme spend more than 27 days in the armed forces and do not qualify to be reservists. They nevertheless give that commitment. Unlike those in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, the reservist is not compelled to complete their commitment to get their pass-out certificate. They have only to complete a minimum of 27 days. The only compelling desire is achieving the tax-free bounty.

We can therefore use that tax-free bounty as a useful way of assessing how many people in the reserves are deployable. It is possible to be an Army reservist without achieving any training targets in a financial year, so if we want to know about the Army reserves, we need to look at how many achieve their bounties. Let us look at the cost of the programme. The easiest way to calculate the cost is to look at the bounty payments combined with the number of reservist service days claimed over the past few years. I am making a general assumption. A basic private’s pay in April 2017 was £46.42 a day—a sum will earn more, and therefore my numbers might be lower, but I am giving the benefit of the doubt and working on the assumption that everybody gets the minimum payment.

In 2016-17, 1,008,290 reserve days were claimed, and 14,930 reservists qualified for their bounty. That resulted in a spend of £68 million—it was nearly £69 million. In the year 2015-16, 957,390 reserve service days were claimed, and 14,990 reservists qualified for their bounty, a spend of £68 million—it was nearly £69 million. In 2014-15, 884,050 reserve service days were claimed, and 14,270 reservists qualified for their bounty. That resulted in a spend of £68 million—it was nearly £69 million. In 2013-14, 834,005 reserve service days were claimed, and 14,270 reservists qualified for their bounty. That resulted in a spend of £68 million—it was nearly £69 million. In 2012-13, 804,000 reserve service days were claimed, and 14,270 reservists qualified for their bounty. That resulted in a spend of £68 million—it was nearly £69 million. In 2011-12, 774,000 reserve service days were claimed, and 14,270 reservists qualified for their bounty. That resulted in a spend of £68 million—it was nearly £69 million.
It is not just a question of the retraining days; it is a question of whether the 15,000 reservists to whom she referred can actually be deployed alongside regular troops. I am told that in some cases there is no joint training at all.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend has referred to the significant reductions in the regular forces. As was mentioned earlier, a large number of former regular service personnel have moved into the reserves, but they may be doing so on a temporary basis. That may explain why so few people—in real terms—are achieving their bounty qualifications each year.

Mrs Moon: I intend to talk about the reserve bonus scheme in the next part of my speech. I am sure my hon. Friend will welcome that.

Part of the problem is that, despite the theory that employers would be willing, and even encouraged, to allow people to take their time to go to, for instance, the annual camp, it is not happening. As people are under pressure to remain in work and to retain their jobs, they are not willing to give those 27 days. They are not able to make that commitment.

Further inefficient costs to the Army reserve can be seen when we look at the “regular to reserve” bonus scheme and its failure to retain personnel. The scheme was introduced in 2013 as a way of enticing former regular soldiers to join the reserves in order to keep their expertise within the military and pass it on to the new reservists who were being recruited. We were retaining capability, and also using the former regulars to train the reserves. The incentive for ex-regulars to join the scheme is, again, financial: a £10,000 bonus is paid in four instalments, provided that they meet the requirements of training and attendance at each stage.

As of October 2017, 4,350 ex-regular soldiers have joined the reserves under the scheme. At first that looks like a good number, but the question is, how many have been retained? In 2017, only 480 of those soldiers achieved all four instalments, which indicates a dropout rate of 89%. I accept that that figure does not take into account the fact that entry into the scheme may be staggered over the preceding four years, but it none the less demonstrates that retention of ex-regular soldiers in the Army reserve is a problem.

I can give an example. An ex-regular soldier who turned up at my house to do a piece of work had signed up for the reserve bonus scheme, and had found that once he had left the military and started work, the pressures of civilian life—being back with his family and getting into the new job—meant that he could not retain the commitment that he had thought he would want to ease his transition out of the military and into the civilian world. These are men and women with vital knowledge and expertise who are used to military life. Their retention is vital, but even with the offer of £10,000, there is not enough to keep them and for them to commit to what is being asked. This further suggests that the current model of the Army reserve just is not working.

The situation looks bad on its own, but if the cost of the scheme is taken into account, it looks a lot worse. Breaking down the entrants to the scheme into their respective ranks and assuming this distribution follows through the key milestone payments, and using these elements and combining wages and bonuses, the scheme so far has cost just over £29 million, with only 480 soldiers reaching all four payments. I am sorry to bat on about this, and I know the figures are boring, but I am deeply concerned. We have a reducing capability in our Army. We have been sold a pup, with a promise that the reserves would fill a gap in the regular forces, but that is not happening.

Defence is an expensive business—there is no getting around that—but it is also a business in which we cannot afford to lose highly skilled and highly able individuals willing to give the time and effort to get through their training so that they are deployable. I know that many Members of this House, including the Minister, are eager to fulfil our commitment to them so that they retain their membership of the reserves and their employability. I honour, and express my gratitude for, the service of all those reservists, but are we getting value for money in a way that allows us as a country to have the forces that we need? It is my concern that we do not, and the MOD’s own figures suggest that the reserves model as it stands cannot provide us with the numbers we need.

The challenges and menaces we face are very real. Many of our platforms are not fit for purpose and the readiness of our forces is just not in place, and we have heard about the disastrous Capita contract. I appreciate that the Minister has apparently suggested that he will resign if the military is cut further, and I hope he does not have to resign, because he is a good Minister, whom we trust, rely on and respect, but we also need the Minister to hear the concerns that we are expressing.

None of us want our Army to be damaged. All of us know that our personnel can, when fully trained and fully committed, be some of the best in the world; that knowledge is shared across our NATO alliance. But we are getting weaker, and that is unacceptable. I call on the Minister to look at how we are spending in terms of the reserve forces.

Toby Perkins: My hon. Friend is making an important point about the numbers, but does she share my concern that a huge amount of experience is being lost from our military? There are people performing roles with a few years’ experience who would have taken 10 or 15 years to reach that position in the past, and the experience of many of them—excellent soldiers and sailors though they are—might come under pressure in the fiercest of circumstances.

Mrs Moon: My hon. Friend is right, and this is also making them so much easier to be bought off by companies who seek the expertise and qualifications they achieve in the military. They feel dissatisfaction when they see the forces they joined—particularly the Army—being hollowed out. That is leading many more to consider leaving.
I shall make one final comment. I have spoken to a young man who was working as a full-time reservist when I first met him. He has told me that a lot of his time as a full-time reservist was spent going out and trying to recruit. He said that one of the most frightening things was that so many of the youngsters he spoke to about joining the armed forces had no understanding of military life. They had no idea of what NATO stood for, for example. This is a wider problem that we as a country need to tackle. We need to get the message out about how invaluable our armed forces are and how critical it is that our young people should seek the life, the experience, the skills, the challenge and the satisfaction of a military career, whether as a reservist or full time.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we still need to do a lot more for people leaving the service? There are still too many ex-military personnel finding civilian life very difficult. Does she agree that we need to support them as they adapt?

Mrs Moon: I agree with my hon. Friend; it is difficult for people who have been in an all-encompassing environment to transition. I know many ex-MPs who have found it very difficult to transition out of this place, because it is not just a job; it is our whole life and requires great commitment. That is what the military is like as well, and that transition is grave.

I shall take no more interventions, but before I finally sit down, I want to make the point that life in the military does not mean that someone will get post-traumatic stress disorder. It worries me that that possibility seems to have got into the public consciousness. Life in the military will offer someone a chance to grow, to mature and to become an asset to their country, and I just wish that more people understood that, rather than thinking about the downsides of joining our military.

5.27 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). As a former Defence Minister, I too can attest to being on the receiving end of a rolling barrage of parliamentary questions. This points to her great assiduity when it comes to defence matters, which she has demonstrated again in her speech this afternoon. I am glad to have been called to speak on the Defence estimates, which, for reasons I will explain, include an important change in the Government’s defence policy. I therefore believe that the estimates need to be increased.

In giving important evidence to the Defence Committee last week, the new Secretary of State for Defence argued that “state on state” threats were now the primary threat to the security of the United Kingdom. This is an important shift in the Government’s position, and it has the logical knock-on effect that defence expenditure should now be increased to meet these new circumstances and the far more serious challenge that they represent.

It is important to put this change into historical context. I shall begin by going back to the 1980s, when the Berlin wall was still standing and the cold war was at its height. Britain, then as now, was a key member of NATO, and we spent about 5% of our GDP on defence, principally to deter the Soviet Union and the other Warsaw pact countries. As the Chairman of the Defence Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), has pointed out in the House before, in the 1990s after the wall had come down, we, like other countries, took a peace dividend. This reduced our defence spending to between 3% and 3.5% of our GDP.

As we entered the new millennium, the horrific events of 9/11 led to massive shifts in strategy. The United Kingdom became involved in expeditionary conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, where our forces became increasingly optimised to fight wars with a counter-insurgency element, at reach, against technologically inferior but nevertheless very determined enemies. As a result, and with the MOD already under considerable financial pressure, we optimised our force mix accordingly while deprioritising areas such as anti-submarine warfare and air defence to the point where, today, we have only 19 frigates and destroyers and have seen a major reduction in fast jet squadrons. As the process continued, by the time of the 2010 strategic defence and security review and the accompanying national security strategy, it became the Government’s policy that there was no existential threat to the security of the United Kingdom. With echoes of the 10-year rule of the 1930s, state-based threats to our security were effectively seen as no longer relevant. However, the events of the past few years have shown those assumptions to be highly erroneous.

The activities of a resurgent Russia in annexing Crimea and effectively invading parts of Ukraine have shown a Russian willingness to use military force on the European landmass in order to achieve its political objectives. We have also seen heavy Russian involvement in Syria, with the House discussing a little over two hours ago, and massively increased Russian submarine activity in the North sea, the north Atlantic and the GIUK gap. Russia has also exerted pressure on the Baltic states, which are now members of NATO and covered by the article 5 guarantee. All of that is occurring at a time when we have reduced our defence expenditure further to where it sits today: barely 2% of our GDP.

Mrs Moon: I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman is going to address our undersea cables and the risks posed by Russian submarines in particular. I was recently at a meeting at which Defence Ministers from several states expressed grave concerns about the number of Russian submarines that they were seeing off their coasts and alarm at those submarines seeking the undersea cables that come ashore in their countries. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of that issue?

Mr Francois: I am sure that the Minister may want to say something about that when he replies, but he will be constrained, because it is difficult to discuss the exact details of such matters in an open forum. However, when I served in the Ministry, I was certainly aware of a potential threat to those undersea cables, and everything that I have understood since then leads me to believe that that threat has increased, not decreased, so the hon. Lady makes an important point. The Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Nick Carter, sounded a timely warning in his recent very good speech to the Royal United Services Institute about growing Russian military capability and areas where we need to bolster our own Army in response.

In the United States, the recently published defence strategy, authored by Secretary Mattis, has declared that state-on-state competition, particularly with Russia
and China, is now viewed as the primary threat to the security of the United States and its allies. That important change in policy was then echoed to some degree by our Secretary of State for Defence in his evidence to the Defence Committee only last Wednesday, and it is really important that the House appreciates what he said. During the sitting, he explained that the threat to the United Kingdom from other states, such as Russia and North Korea, is now greater than the threat posed by terrorism, telling the Committee:

“We would highlight state-based threats... as the top priority”.

He went on to say that state-based threats have “grown immeasurably over the past few years.”

When I put it to the Secretary of State at that hearing that what he was announcing—the primacy of state-based threats to our security—was a massive change in focus and that it would have a knock-on effect on how Britain’s military was structured and its readiness for war, he replied unequivocally, “Yes it does.”

That means that the defence review that is currently under way—the modernising defence programme—is now taking place against a significantly revised strategic background, in which deterring military threats from other states such as Russia, North Korea and, to a lesser extent, China is now to become the primary focus of this country’s defence policy. This new context brings with it certain important implications.

First, we absolutely must retain our independent strategic nuclear deterrent as the ultimate guarantee of our national security. All three states I just mentioned are nuclear-armed, and it is important that we retain our deterrent to deter any nuclear threat against us.

Secondly, if we are to deter state-on-state threats, clearly we must bolster our conventional defences. Joseph Stalin is reputed to have said, “Quantity has a quality all of its own.” We can no longer rely on advances in technological capability always to give us the edge in any future war. We also need to make sure we have sufficient mass—the number of platforms—to deter our potential enemies. That means, for instance, rebuilding our air defences and bolstering our anti-submarine warfare capabilities to help to protect the sea lines of communication across the Atlantic, which will be vital in any conflagration on the European mainland.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, and I am interested in his comments on rebuilding our air defences. Is he as encouraged as I am by the announcement last week of the combat air strategy? Does he also agree that, given the enormous cost of modern aviation programmes, we will have to look at doing one of two things? We will either have to take a very serious strategic look at what kind of aviation military capacity we want and then to plan accordingly, or, if we want full-spectrum military capability, it will ultimately mean more money.

Mr Francois: I agree with my hon. Friend. He is right that the Secretary of State for Defence announced the new combat air strategy at the Committee, but what he announced on state-on-state threats was even more important. If we now have to deter Russian aviation capability as a state-on-state threat, it will be extremely expensive but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) wisely reminded the House in his excellent introduction to this debate, the first duty of Government, above all others, is the defence of the realm. Our whole history as a nation reminds us that we forget that at our peril.

Thirdly, we must seriously consider how we could reconstitute forces in a national emergency. We must accumulate war reserves in order to show that we have the ability to sustain a fight if we were ever to get into one. As just one example, the Committee took evidence from BAE Systems executives a few months ago. When we asked how long it would take to build a Typhoon from scratch, we were told it would take four years or, if they attempted to accelerate the process, perhaps three years at best.

Those long lead times for manufacturing sophisticated modern military equipment mean that, in reality, we would likely have to fight a so-called “come as you are” war, which involves using equipment that is either immediately available or that can be reintroduced into service at short notice. It follows from this that we should now adopt a practice of mothballing highly expensive and complex equipment when it goes out of service—rather than disposing of it all, often for a pittance—so we have the ability to reconstitute at least some mass, should that be required if the skies were ever to darken again.

Fourthly, in light of the new strategic situation of state-on-state threats, spending 2% of our GDP on defence is simply not sufficient. We helped to deter Russia during the cold war by spending 5% of GDP on defence. If we now have to deter Russia again, we will simply not be able to do so by spending only 2% of GDP on defence—our allies also need to make a greater contribution. If we are to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent, bolster our conventional forces and build up our war reserves, we obviously need to spend something much nearer to 3% than 2% on defence. If we will the ends, we must also will the means.

Finally, I went to the cinema recently to watch Gary Oldman’s wonderful portrayal of Winston Churchill in “Darkest Hour”—he got the BAFTA and I very much hope he gets the Oscar, too. That film brought home graphically what happened to our nation after the policy of appeasement in the 1930s and our having run down our armed forces to the point where they were unable to deter war. I humbly suggest that my friends the “pinstripe warriors” of the Treasury, as I call them, should be taken en masse to watch that film as part of their continued professional development, in the hope that that might yet bolster our overall determination as a nation to defend ourselves.

5.40 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am going to make a relatively brief contribution to this debate. I wish to make one simple point, which I shall base on something I have mentioned before in this Chamber. First, for the record, I probably ought to draw the House’s attention to the fact that I have a family member serving in the armed forces.

What we should do first is bank the good news, which, as we all know, is that the armed forces enjoy popular support the length and breadth of this country. I have made mention before of the Territorials and cadets in my constituency, all of whom are greatly supported by the local communities. It gladdens everyone’s heart.
to see the cadets parade on Remembrance Sunday. Even better is when, as happens now and again, the 4th Battalion the Royal Regiment of Scotland—the Seaforths, Gordons and Camerons—come to exercise their right to parade through my home town of Tain with bayonets fixed and colours flying. I assure Members that people from my home town and round about turn out in great numbers to see this. Equally, when HMS Sutherland pays her occasional visit to the county of Sutherland, at Invergordon in Easter Ross or indeed off the north coast, people are very pleased to see that warship.

I wish to take the opportunity to give my personal thanks to the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood). He may not know about this, but a Royal Navy warship—a small one, I suspect—is going to visit Wick on 6 April. That is hot news in the royal borough of Wick and I assure him that the ship will be very well received. As a humorous aside, I might add that my own way of saying thank you to the 4th Battalion the Royal Regiment of Scotland when it came to parade was to give the sergeants’ mess a bottle of very good whisky made in my home town which goes by the name of Glenmorangie. The commanding officer was not at all pleased with me for having done that, but I shall spare him. Members the details.

So I have set out the basic premise on which I base my argument, which is that we have the foundation of good will, and the point I wish to make today is simply that we should build on it. In the past, small local projects could be undertaken by the armed forces for the good of the community. In the past, the Royal Engineers could come out to build a small bridge, repair a footpath and so on. One might say that that was not a wise expenditure of armed forces money, but they do have to train. We should try to get back to that kind of involvement of the armed forces in the community. I am not talking about doing this in a social work way; it should be a genuine involvement.

Mention has been made of how so many people are unaware of what the armed forces do and even of what NATO stands for. One way of reversing that decline is to get the people in Wick to come on board this warship on 6 April—they will learn something—and to come to see the 4th Battalion the Royal Regiment of Scotland parading. That will build up knowledge, and will build up even further confidence in and enthusiastic support for our armed forces.

**Stephen Kerr:** The hon. Gentleman is making a good series of points about the outreach of the armed forces and their visibility. Ought we not to encourage the more widespread wearing of uniform by service personnel when they are going about their business in our communities? The standard practice is for them to wear civilian clothing, but wearing the uniform, as the American services do, would also raise the profile and recognition of our armed forces.

**Jamie Stone:** That point is extremely well made. I might say, for the amusement of the House, that when I was a lowly private in the 2nd Battalion the 51st Highland Volunteers I used to find that one of the best ways to get home after a long camp far away in a remote part of the highlands was to wear my uniform and hitchhike—invariably, one got a lift pretty fast.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): Do you still use it?

**Jamie Stone:** Unfortunately, that uniform has shrunk over time.

We have heard so many times in this Chamber about the difficulty our armed forces have recruiting. If we build up the good will and the knowledge of what the armed forces do and stand for, as the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, that will surely improve recruitment. That is the prize because, at the end of the day, the defence of the realm, with the enthusiastic support of the people, is paramount.

5.45 pm

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I might be a touch over-optimistic, but I get the impression that a sea change is going on, at least in this Chamber. It was only in 2016 that we first started to debate whether 2% of gross domestic product was a sufficient investment for this country to make in defence in peacetime. At that time, it seemed fairly outlandish to suggest that we ought to be talking about 3% of GDP or even more. It is not outlandish to suggest that now. Of course, that is partly because of the shift in the strategic situation, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) outlined so comprehensively a few moments ago, but it is also partly because of the efforts of colleagues on the Government and Opposition Benches—I pay tribute to my old friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for doing this today—to bring this subject forward time and again to impress on the House and the country that we are simply not investing enough in defence.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford referred to pinstriped warriors in the civil service. I do not wish to point any fingers in any particular directions, but when the National Security Adviser appeared before the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy on 18 December and was asked whether it would be possible for him to recommend that the defence budget ought to be increased, given the fact that the security capability review that he had been conducting was supposed to be fiscally neutral, it worried me that he responded:

> “When I said that the 2015 review was fiscally neutral, it was fiscally neutral within a growing envelope.”

In other words, he meant that there were certain absolute increases in the sums being spent. At a later stage, having tried to lump together the defence budget with all other moneys spent on security of one form or another to give a global figure of £56 billion, he went on to say:

> “If we concluded that the total set of capabilities, optimised across that £56 billion, was insufficient to meet the threats, of course we would say that to Ministers. That is not a conclusion I expect to reach, but of course I always have the freedom to give Ministers candid advice.”

I am rather worried if our top security professionals do not feel even a twinge of doubt about the level of priority that we are giving to defence. When sometimes people stress the point, which is not without merit, that when we talk about spending 2% or 3% of GDP we are talking about inputs, not outputs in terms of capability, I say to them that of course it is true that we could spend a huge amount of money on defence, but if we spent it on all the wrong things, it would not do us a lot of good. Conversely, though, if we are simply not spending enough on defence, nothing that we can do will give us the outputs we need.
Mr Kevan Jones: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says about civil servants, but the decision to cut the defence budget by 16% between 2010 and 2015 was not a civil servant’s invention. It was the political decision of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Government at the time.

Dr Lewis: Yes, and I will come to the issue of how we can use the percentage of GDP to track what has been happening to defence in a moment. I hope that the hon. Gentleman—a former Defence Minister in the Labour Government, of course, and a very good one—will try to be non-partisan about this for the simple reason that successive Governments are responsible for what has happened.

What actually took place was, as has already been hinted at, something that has been going on over a very long period. Colleagues on both sides of the House have heard me recite this so often that I am afraid they might do that terrible thing and join in, singing the song with me. But I will just run through it again. In 1963, the falling graph of defence expenditure as a proportion of GDP crossed over with the rising graph of expenditure on welfare and defence. In the mid-1980s, as we have heard, we regularly spent between 4.5% and 5% of GDP on defence, and that was the period when we were spending at that time roughly the same amount on education and health. We were spending six times on welfare what we spend on defence, and we spend two and a half times on education what we spend on defence.

We have to ask what we mean when we say that defence is the first duty of Government. If it is the first duty of Government, it is a duty that is more important than any other duty, because if we fail to discharge it everything else is put in jeopardy.

Toby Perkins: I partly take the right hon. Gentleman’s point, if he is looking back to 1963 and the role of successive Governments from then to now. But it is also true that there was a substantial cut in defence spending in 2010-11, which bears no relationship to what happened in the previous 13 years. If defence spending had carried on increasing in real terms from 2009-10 to the present, £10 billion more would be being spent on defence than is spent under this Government. That is a substantial change from this Government to the previous one.

Dr Lewis: I will not defend what happened in 2010. I was a shadow Defence Minister for slightly longer than the duration of the second world war in the years up to 2010, and I was told retrospectively that the reason I never became a real Defence Minister was that it was known that I would not go along with what they were planning to do. So I am not inclined to lay down my life for the Cameron-Lib Dem coalition of those years. I did not do it then, and I will not do it now.

Having said that, it is all part of a bigger trend, and I come back to my projection of the situation. At the end of the cold war, as we have heard, we took the peace dividend. We had the reductions, which were reasonable under the circumstances. But in 1995-96—the middle of the 1990s and several years after we had taken the peace dividend reductions—we were not spending barely 2% of GDP on defence as we do now, but we were spending fully 3% of GDP on defence. From then on it was downhill all the way.

John Spellar: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Lewis: I will give way to my good friend the deputy Chairman of the Committee in a moment.

I can remember Tony Blair on HMS Albion in 2007, looking back on his 10 years as Prime Minister and saying, “Well, I think we can say that we have kept defence spending roughly constant at 2.5% of GDP if the cost of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq are included.” But in fact the cost of operations should not have been included, because they are meant to be met from the Treasury reserve. The real figure over the Blair decade came down to 2.1% or 2.2% of GDP.

John Spellar: It is clear from the figures provided by the Library that while in most years there was an actual increase in defence expenditure during the years of that Labour Government, since 2010 it has been -1.4%, -1.4%, -4%, -3.3%, -2.4% and -2.9%, and in 2016-17 it did actually go into the positive, +1.4%. My friend should be clear that there was a step-change when the Cameron Government came in that led to year-on-year cuts, and our armed forces are feeling the effect of that.

Dr Lewis: What I am looking for today is agreement across the House that we recognise that we should not be having almost theological debates about whether we are just above or just below the 2% minimum guideline that NATO prescribes to its member states for defence expenditure, but that we have to get back to the level—at the very least—of what we considered appropriate for so long, right up until the mid-1990s, when the Labour Government came in, which was 3% of GDP.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Lewis: I will give way one more time, but I want to concentrate on the bigger picture, because frankly neither of the parties has much to be proud about on defence expenditure since the mid-1990s.

Mr Jones: The facts do not bear out what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. According to the Library, the last time defence expenditure was 3% was 1993-94. After that, there was a 7% decrease in 1995, a 1% decrease in 1996 and a 5.7% increase the following year. The Labour Government came in, following the Treasury rules laid down by the previous Government, and in 1998 increased defence spending by 5.8%. The idea that the last Labour Government were following a trend that had been set is just not the case.

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Dr Lewis: It depends whether the hon. Gentleman is talking about absolute figures or percentages of GDP spent on defence. In 2016, the Defence Committee produced a unanimous report called “Shifting the Goalposts? Defence expenditure and the 2% pledge”. We had the Committee staff use all available sourcing to draw up a definitive table of what had been spent on defence by Britain as a proportion of GDP over the past 50 years.
The figures for the period we are talking about are: 1990-91, 3.8%; 1991-92, 3.8%; 1992-93, 3.7%; 1993-94, 3.5%; 1994-95, 3.3%; and 1995-96, 3%. It then dips below 3% in 1996-97 to 2.7%, and thereafter it is down and down, with little blips here and there, until it is hovering around 2.5% because the cost of operations were included.

The point about all this is that we should not be arguing about who did the most damage. We should be agreeing about what we need in the future. If we are hearing a chorus of voices from the Labour Benches—it is music to my ears—saying that we have not been spending enough on defence and we need to be spending more, that is what we should be saying loud and clear to those people who seem to be perfectly content to spend the existing inadequate sums.

I do not wish to prolong my contribution, but I do wish to speak briefly about the equipment plan that was alluded to in some detail by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough. The equipment plan of 2016 is for £178 billion over 10 years. That includes a small number—nine, which some would say was too small a number—of new P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, replacing a capability that was quite wrongly dispensed with after 2010. We are also supposed to be replacing 13 Type 23 frigates and supplying mechanised infantry vehicles out of this budget, and we are of course engaged in resurrecting carrier strike capability—another capacity that was temporarily lost after 2010.

The first report of the Defence Committee in the new Parliament was entitled, “Gambling on ‘Efficiency’: Defence Acquisition and Procurement”. The word “efficiency” was in inverted commas because we believe that the affordability of the scheme is predicated on an estimate of £7.3 billion of theoretical efficiency savings that are to be made in addition to some £7.1 billion that was previously announced. As we have heard, the National Audit Office thinks that the equipment programme is at greater risk than at any time since reporting was introduced in 2012. The truth of the matter is that we encounter black holes everywhere we look in defence. This brings me to my concluding point.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for the points he is making. We can starkly illustrate this issue. Training operations that had been committed for next year have been delayed, and we now hear that there are more. We also heard, very openly, that the affordability of the scheme is predicated on an estimate of £7.3 billion of theoretical efficiency savings that are to be made in addition to some £7.1 billion that was previously announced. As we have heard, the National Audit Office thinks that the equipment programme is at greater risk than at any time since reporting was introduced in 2012. The truth of the matter is that we encounter black holes everywhere we look in defence. This brings me to my concluding point.

Dr Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is a stalwart of the Committee. I hope that he will develop that important point if he catches your eye presently, Mr Deputy Speaker. Obviously there has to be flexibility and a means of making adjustments when adjustments have to be made to very large sums during the course of an annual budget cycle. But we are talking about an overall shortfall that is so great that we are not going to get anywhere unless we recognise reality and accept that defence should not be so far down the national scale of priorities that it has far left behind those areas of high Government expenditure with which it used to bear straight comparison.

I mentioned previously the National Security Adviser and his security and capability review. The House will know something of the difficulties that the Defence Committee has had in getting the National Security Adviser to appear before it on the grounds—he says—that defence was only one out of 12 strands in that review. The new Secretary of State for Defence has now had some success in regaining control of that one strand for the MOD. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for a very in-depth interrogation of the people who are currently charged with the overall design of our defence and security policy.

At the present time, there is a degree of complacency by people who work in these Ministries. Then, as if by magic, the scales drop from their eyes the moment that they leave. Dare I say this in relation to our most recent former Secretary of State for Defence? Throughout his tenure he played a very straight bat, constantly talking up how much more money was being spent on defence. But within a very short time of leaving his position he made an excellent speech—I believe it was on 22 January this year—in which he said not only that he feels that we need to spend more on defence, but that we ought to be spending 2.5% of GDP on defence by the end of this Parliament.

In the further contributions to this debate, I look to some magic formula that will take hold of our Defence Ministers, civil servants, National Security Adviser and all the rest who seem to think that all is well with the world when, confronted with threats such as we face today, we are spending a fraction of what we used to spend in percentage terms of GDP, and who are saying, “Everything is fine and we are on course.” We are not on course. We need to change course, and the direction in which we have to go is towards a significant uplift to 3% of GDP to be spent on the defence of the United Kingdom.

6.6 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I want, first, to say something about spending and then to say a bit more about some of the points that can be made from the actual estimates. I think that that would help the defence debate. I will refer to historical defence spending but, whatever the rights and wrongs of that argument, let me say this: there is no disguising the fact that this country is not spending enough on the defence and security of the realm. I have said that before and I will say it again. That is the frank reality. That is the truth. That point has been heard—loud and clear.

My advice to the Minister is that he and the Defence Secretary use the power of this Parliament’s voice to go to the Prime Minister and tell her that we, the elected representatives, by and large do not think that we are spending enough on the defence and security of the country. As the Chair of the Defence Committee said, it is no good generals, admirals, national security people or whoever is responsible telling secret meetings that there is a real problem, and then, in three weeks’ or three months’ time, trying to tell the British public that £x million or £x billion more is needed and expecting them just to click their fingers on the basis of, “If you only knew what we knew.” It is not good enough and it is not satisfactory.

I have said at many meetings that the whole of Government need to shift their attitude and be clear what we are talking about. My hon. Friend the Member
for North Durham (Mr Jones) will make this point in a different way. The tables are available from the House of Commons Library. Hon. Members can go back to when they want. One paper goes back to 1956, showing the percentage of GDP spent on defence at 6%. It is now at 2%. We can see the ups and downs within that time but, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the table is clear.

Let me give Members one stark reality. The out-turn figure for the defence budget in 2009-10 was £4.5 billion at 2016-17 prices. These are not my figures; they are the Library’s. If the Government think that they are wrong, they should tell the Library. The 2016-17 out-turn figures, at 2016-17 prices, were just over £35 billion. There are some notes at the bottom which, quite frankly, I do not properly understand; they talk about changes in accounting practices, and counting this or counting that. However, there can be no doubt that it is a huge reduction. I totally agree with the Chair of the Defence Committee that we are now in a position where we all need to say that more should be spent and more has to be spent. The drop in the figures in that table is frankly astonishing.

Let me ask a couple of questions of the Minister that I really want answered. One of the big things that came out of the defence debate that we had a few weeks ago was that the National Security Adviser said that anything he found—it did not matter what it was—had to be fiscally neutral. The Chair of the Defence Committee said, and I agree, that the state-on-state threats are much greater and more intensified than they were. But apparently that does not matter: it has to be fiscally neutral. Can I ask the Minister a direct question? If the apparently that does not matter: it has to be fiscally neutral. Can I ask the Minister a direct question? If the

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman answers his own question in a way. He asked for, and supports, a fiscally open defence modernisation programme. That will pose the question as to whether we want A variants or B variants of the F-35s. The study needs to be done. On the individual cost, he knows from his own experience that it will vary, as the cost of prototypes does. There was not a unit cost for the F-16 because it was a prototype. It is very difficult to pinpoint the exact cost because the life cycles, the upgrades and the weapons systems that would be put on board vary. That is why we cannot provide the exact figure that he is seeking.

Vernon Coaker: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. That is the point of the debate on estimates days. For the Minister to be able to say that we will have the capabilities that we need to meet the threats that we will face, we need to be able to say how much those capabilities are going to cost. My hon. Friend raised the issue of frigates; I am using the example of the F-35s. Cannot the Minister go back to the people who plan this and say, “We need some detail on these costs. Otherwise, how can we project forward what the equipment plan or any other plan is going to cost us?”

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman will perhaps be surprised by how much I will say in my speech that—I hope—he agrees with, as I agree with him. The capability review was fiscally neutral, and we found that unacceptable. That was the first thing that the Secretary of State dealt with, perhaps breaking the trend that my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Defence Committee suggested was the case. Let me make it very clear that the study that we are doing now is not fiscally neutral, but we do have to decide what our defence posture is and how much it will cost.

Vernon Coaker: There we go—that is the power of Parliament. That is the point I am making. We had the debate before and this was fiscally neutral. The original review—the national security and defence capability review, or whatever it was—was not set up by accident; the Government set it up, and defence was included in it. Parliament said that that was not acceptable, and the Government responded and took it out. We then said that it was not acceptable for that review to be fiscally neutral, and now the Government are saying that it will not be. Of course no one is saying that we should buy chariots or whatever—what we have has to be relevant to the needs that we face. Before, the process was budget-driven: it was a case of having whatever it needed to be in order to meet the budget requirement.

It is going to be difficult for the Government to do this when, for example, we are told today that, even in their response to the Select Committee’s report on the F-35 programme, they will not put a figure on what one F-35 is going to cost. Then the Government say, “We’re buying 138 F-35s—that is the current plan—and 48 will be F-35Bs, but we’re not sure what variant the other 90 are going to be.” How can the Government talk about being fiscally neutral in their plans when they could not say to the Defence Committee a couple of months ago what the cost of the F-35 is and they cannot tell us in their response published today either?

Mr Kevan Jones: It is not just the F-35. Much has been said in the past few weeks about the procurement of the new Type 31e frigate. There is no line in the defence budget for that. Likewise, the P-8, which is being trumpeted as a vital need for our maritime patrol aircraft—I agree—is not capable of delivering the sonar buoys or torpedoes that are currently being used, so there is added cost there.

Vernon Coaker: I will leave it there, but the Government need to have a better idea, and make it public to the Select Committee and Parliament, of the individual costs. I say gently to the Minister that, otherwise, in a year’s time or two years’ time, he will find himself in exactly the same place that the Government find themselves now, where the National Audit Office is pointing to various gaps in the affordability of the equipment programme.
Let me give another example of where the Government need to be clearer with regard to their estimates. I again say this as something that the Minister and the Government should be saying to the Treasury and to the Prime Minister. The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) mentioned this point. As the Minister knows, the Government have had to bring forward £300 million to pay for some more up-front costs with regard to the deterrent programme. When they were asked where that money had been taken from, there was a very vague answer, to put it mildly. In essence, therefore, it is an IOU for future programmes. I think that between 2006 and 2007—certainly in the last few years of the Labour Government—where there was an up-front cost that perhaps needed to be taken from future programmes, the Treasury came forward with an uplift to the defence budget to pay for it. That then gave some certainty to future programmes.

Because the Treasury has not uplifted the Ministry of Defence figure by that £300 million, there is already a potential £300 million gap in the future—next year or the year after. I say this to the Government, again trying to be helpful: the Ministry of Defence should go to No. 10 and say, “We believe that where there are additional costs with regard to our deterrent programme that were unforeseen, or there was a growth in those costs, the Treasury should fund that uplift in costs, as was previous practice”—for example, the £300 million. I use that as just one example.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has given two excellent examples. There are plans for a super-garrison at Catterick. I understand that service accommodation was meant to be completed by 2020 but is now estimated at 2023, which will clearly create cost overruns. Around the Carillion/Ameay contract, again, we are seeing a lack of maintenance on that, which will end up costing us more. We are seeing cost overruns in not just equipment but a whole range of areas, including accommodation.

Vernon Coaker: My hon. Friend gives another good example.

I have given the Minister a couple of examples, notwithstanding all the questions. I make a plea again to him and to the Government: when we know that the Government are considering their options on amphibious ships, please do not say to Parliament that these are things they cannot talk about and that the Government do not comment on leaks. That does not help us. It does not help this Parliament in trying to support Ministers to ensure they have the resources to defend the country. We then have a situation where, three months or two years down the line, those capabilities are scrapped, and we are all left thinking, “If only we’d known a bit more.”

Let me also mention something positive that the Government should do. We should help to explain this to the British public. Tucked away in annex A of the estimates, under the “Memorandum for the Ministry of Defence Supplementary Estimates 2017-18”, the Government list the additional estimates that they have had to ask the Treasury for for operations. I do not believe the British public would know how many operations our armed forces are rightly involved with.

If we want to build support for our armed forces, we should be telling the public that there is £1 billion for operations, peacekeeping and the MOD’s share of the conflict, stability and security fund, and that there is a further allocation of £84 million for the UK’s contribution to Afghanistan, as well as allocations for the wider Gulf, counter-Daesh activities, the EU mission to counter migrant smugglers in the Mediterranean, NATO enhanced forward presence in Estonia and Poland, enhanced intelligence and surveillance, and support to UN peacekeeping operations in Somalia and South Sudan. Those are just some examples, and the Treasury is giving money to the MOD to support all those different things.

Our country is proud of that work. Our country is proud that our armed forces are involved in defending human rights, defending democracy and doing what they can to ensure that stability exists and conflict is prevented. The Government should be shouting much more loudly about that. It should not be tucked away in an annex; it should be one of the forefront siren calls that the Minister makes in these estimates debates.

I finish with this, and it goes back to where I started. We are not spending enough money on the defence and security of the realm and the role that this country plays in promoting democracy and defending human rights across the world with our allies. All power to the MOD’s elbow when it goes to the Treasury and the Prime Minister to demand more money, but let that be done through the voice of this Parliament, where the majority of Members believe we should be spending more money and will support the Minister in trying to achieve that.

6.23 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Angus is proud of its long-standing ties to the armed forces, and it is vital for both the country’s defences and the Angus economy that the armed forces are properly funded. While I am pleased that this Government are committed to meeting the NATO target of spending 2% of GDP on defence and that the UK has been one of only three NATO members to consistently meet that target since 2010, we should be careful not to rest on our laurels. I completely agree that we should look at 2% as an absolute minimum on which we should build. It is a start, not an end point.

The world is constantly changing, both politically and technologically. It is crucial that our military capabilities are funded sufficiently to ensure that they can keep up with those changes and secure our country in any and all circumstances. At the same time, funding alone is not enough. We must ensure that the money the Ministry of Defence does receive is spent as wisely as possible, and this Government have worked hard to make defence spending more efficient. The Government took the right decision to conduct a new defence review this year, and I look forward to its completion. I hope it will lay the groundwork for a well-funded, well-equipped military that is fit for the challenges the future may hold.

I firmly believe that the RM Condor base in Angus must be part of that future. RM Condor and the Royal Marines of 45 Commando who serve there are a valued part of Angus’s community and economy. Moreover, through their skills and professionalism, they help to keep this entire country safe. I am glad therefore to have been assured on many occasions that RM Condor will remain an integral part of our defence capability.

RM Condor quite simply is good value for money, and I am pleased that this Government recognise that. Cynical scaremongering about the future of the base by
some in the Scottish National party does nobody any
good and serves only to cause unnecessary anxiety for
service personnel and their families. It is important that
45 Commando continues to have the necessary facilities
at RM Condor, and while there are ongoing discussions
about the future of the base’s airfield, the review must
be conducted in such a way that it does not detrimentally
affect work at RM Condor. Currently the airfield offers
training facilities for the in-house rifle range and an
incredibly impressive indoor facility for urban combat
drills that they built themselves inside one of the old
aircraft carrier hangars on the airfield. It would be
foolish to divert so much of the airfield that 45 Commando
was unable to utilise those resources and had to travel
to alternative ranges for training.

This question can and must be resolved in a
way that works for RM Condor and Angus as a whole. I
look forward to these upcoming developments in defence
spending. I hope and expect that they will deliver for Angus
and the United Kingdom as a whole and demonstrate
that we can trust only a Conservative Government with
the armed forces.

I maintain the point that I made earlier. It is tremendously
disappointing that the Secretary of State is not here to
respond to the debate. I take the Minister’s point about
the fact that the Secretary of State is meeting the Prime
Minister. I am sure she is a busy woman and he is a busy
man, but, given how much we read about how extensively
the Secretary of State is supposed to be lobbying for defence
spending, it would have been good if he had been here.

I have been in the position of being on the Front
Bench and having people complain about the fact that I
am the one responding. It is meant as no insult to the
Minister. In my opinion, he might make a better Secretary
of State than the one we have at the moment, but I do
not mean to undermine his career by saying so. I would
prefer it even more if my hon. Friend the Member for
Llanelli (Nia Griffith) was the Secretary of State. I say
again, it would have been good if the Secretary of State
had been here.

I repeat the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon): it would be a
tremendous shame if the Minister was forced into a
position where he felt he had to resign because of the
level of cuts to the Ministry of Defence. He would be a
loss to the Government. I know how seriously he takes
his position and what an agony it would be for him if he
had to do so, so I hope he is not placed in that position.

The truth is that this Government have presided over
the scale of cuts and over the failure of armed forces
recruitment that we have seen. The Government have
presided over huge cuts—[Interruption.] The Secretary of
State’s arrival shows the power of my speeches. Not
only have the Government broken their 2015 manifesto
pledge to retain a standing Army of 82,000, but we continue
to see more people leaving the Army than joining it, and
under this Government military housing is in a disgraceful
state.

The Government have announced numerous unfunded
spending commitments, which are estimated by the National
Audit Office to have left a £21 billion black hole, and
they have achieved their commitment to continue spending
2% of GDP on defence by including things that would
never previously have been included. I have to say—I am
sure my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham
(Mr Jones), who was previously on the Front Bench,
would repeat this with feeling—that if any Labour
Secretary of State for Defence had presided over such a
record, the right-wing press would be demanding their
head on a platter in a way that defied anything previously
seen in the press.

The moment is arriving when the Government must
decide what their story is. We are hearing that the
country faces very significant new threats. The scale of
the threat from Russia has grown to its greatest extent at
any time since the cold war. Brexit means that a not
insignificant element of our key partners’ defence response
will take place through an institution that we are no
longer a part of. There is an urgent need to scale up our
cyber and hybrid warfare capabilities. We have observed
the extent of Russia’s upscaling of its capabilities, and
we need to take action to ensure that we are responding.
We are also seeing regular incursions by Russian aircraft
and submarines into UK space, and an increasingly
aggressive posture by Russia and Putin. If all those
things are true—I believe they are, and we have heard
from credible sources that they are—it is unconscionable
for defence spending to have such a low priority in the
apparent strategic approach of the wider Government.

As my hon. Friend has said, the roots of the current
defence spending crisis lie in the disastrous 2010 SDSR,
and the Government must be held to account for
their performance. The real-terms funding cut in the
departmental expenditure limit since 2010 is almost
£10 billion. As my colleagues have said, this is an
extraordinary amount out of a budget that was about
£40 billion back in 2010, and this at a time when
inflation in defence equipment and skill shortages have
grown substantially. It is therefore impossible to take
seriously the suggestion that the Prime Minister is presiding
over a Government who have our nation’s future safe in
their hands.

I have long feared that the announcements made in
the 2015 SDSR on future defence procurement bore
no relation to the budgets set for it. I thought that the
2015 SDSR was a considerable improvement on what
had gone before—that may be setting a low bar, but it
was an improvement—and it is important to recognise
that. However, if the budgets from the Treasury for the
Ministry of Defence do not bear any relationship to
what is promised, it is incumbent on all of us to highlight
that. The NAO figures showing a £21 billion black hole
demonstrate that I was right to be suspicious.

The Government should come clean. I am absolutely
calling on the Government to bring forward more money,
but if they are not going to do that—if the Treasury is
not willing to come up with the amount required to fill
the black hole—the Government must be candid with
Parliament and with the people about which of the
spending commitments made in the SDSR are not
going to happen.

The Government will get so far in bridging the gap by
putting off decisions and allowing timescales to slide,
such as with the commitment on the Type 26s. There is
now a commitment—or a theoretical commitment—on Type 31s, but I suspect the actual development of the frigate will continue to be pushed into the long grass. Each of these delays both undermines the ability of our armed forces to respond and increases the demand on the servicemen and women on the existing platforms.

I am immensely proud of the UK’s commitment to the aircraft carriers. They are a piece of collateral that the whole nation should take pride in. It was a really important announcement—initially by the previous Labour Government and subsequently by the coalition Government—to commission and then to build them. However, the scale of the current cuts calls into question the amount of resources required by the aircraft carriers. In 2009-10, when the idea was initially put in place to go forward with the aircraft carriers, the Government were spending, in today’s terms, about £45 billion a year on the armed forces. With a Government who are now spending £35 billion, it is a different decision, and it has to be placed in the context of the scale of subsequent Government spending cuts to the MOD.

The Government appear to have a strategy of not going forward with more Type 26 frigates, but of having a greater number of Type 31s instead. That means we will have less capable ships, but they can be in more different places at the same time. As I have said, this calls into question the amount of resources—both financial resources and personnel—that the aircraft carriers will be consuming. Whether the Government would have commissioned two aircraft carriers if the scale of the subsequent cuts had been known about at the time is an important question.

I asked the Minister for the Armed Forces a parliamentary question about the scale of current recruitment and retention performance, and almost all the major arms of the Army lost more people last year than they recruited. The Royal Regiment of Artillery lost 170 more people than it recruited; the Royal Engineers, 130; the Royal Corps of Signals, 270; the infantry, 750; and the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, 100. There was a similar picture for the reserves, which we were told would make up some of the deficit. In the Army future reserves, the Royal Engineers lost 50 more people than it recruited; the Royal Corps of Signals, 20; the Royal Logistic Corps, 200; and REME, 160. Right across the Army, more people have left the service than have been recruited.

This reduction is to an Army that is already significantly under the numbers promised in the Conservative party manifesto of 2015. I believe I am right in saying that a standing Army of 82,000 is no longer the policy of the Government, although they have never officially come out and said that. It is very clear that a significant commitment was made in the 2015 general election—it was a very popular commitment—and they should be held to account for delivering on it.

Soldier numbers in our Army, which were stable throughout the previous Labour Government—they actually went up during the last five years of the Labour Government—have fallen from 98,340 in 2010 to 73,870 now. It is interesting that while there has been a fall of 25% in the number of soldiers, there has been a fall of only 15% in the number of officers. It is an interesting development for a Government who pride themselves—or claim to pride themselves—on defending the frontline that we have seen a bigger decrease in the ranks than in the officer numbers, and that is significant.

There is clearly a significant funding element to the fall in Army numbers, but there are also a number of other reasons why they are in such a distressing state. Morale among members of our armed forces continues to be challenged both by the demands placed on them and by issues such as pay and pensions, the quality of housing and the number of times that they have to go repeatedly on different kinds of deployments because of the shortage in numbers.

There is also real fear among our armed forces regarding this place’s commitment to actually using the Army. Our 2013 debate about airstrikes in Syria, which was referred to a great deal in the response to the urgent question immediately before this debate, called into question this place’s commitment to keeping an Army and being willing to use it. I get a strong sense from my responsibilities on the armed forces parliamentary scheme that there are people in our Army who think it is legitimate to question what we in this place actually see as their role and our willingness to deploy them.

The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) made a strong point about the outsourcing partner’s performance on recruitment and demanded that it step up or ship out. He did not quite put it like that—I am paraphrasing—but he was absolutely right. As I have said in previous debates—I do not apologise for saying so again—it would be beneficial if the Government published the number of people in each constituency who are recruited to the armed forces, so that we can take pride in our constituents. That would also enable us to hold to account the outsourcing company for its performance with regard not only to the overall numbers that it recruits, but to where it is recruiting them from and the extent to which it is achieving its aims.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for introducing the debate. I say to the Minister and to the Secretary of State, who popped in but has popped out again—I apologise: I expected him to be on the Front Bench. He has popped back, not popped out. I say to him that he can be absolutely certain that there is a real commitment among Members to strengthen his arm in his negotiations with the Treasury. We wish him every success and he can be absolutely certain that he will have our support if he is able to get from future spending reviews the resources that our armed forces need and deserve.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Let us have the hon. and gallant Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty).

6.43 pm

**Leo Docherty** (Aldershot) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are considering the way in which the Ministry of Defence spends its money, and I want to draw attention to an instance of the MOD spending money in a very unwise way. It is my belief that its funding of the Iraq Fatality Investigations unit is a misuse of MOD money—taxpayers’ money—that allows the unit to pursue soldiers and veterans in a vexatious and spurious manner, and is having a highly detrimental effect on the bond of trust that underpins the relationship between the Government and their soldiers. I call on the MOD to bring to an end its funding of the IFT unit.
I draw attention to the experience of a serving soldier and Iraq veteran, Major Robert Campbell, a decorated and injured soldier who has faced seven separate inquiries of one form or another into an historical incident involving the unfortunate death of an Iraqi teenager some 15 years ago. Major Campbell has been cleared and exonerated by all seven inquiries, the most recent of which concluded in December 2017. The service prosecuting authority decided that no charges should be brought. Some of the inquiries he had to endure also involved the now defunct and utterly diminished Iraq Historic Allegations Team, which brought about a series of inquiries driven by the discredited lawyer, Phil Shiner, who has now quite rightly been struck off.

Given the fact that the Government rightly acted to close IHAT, it is unfortunate that it seems to have been born again in the form of the Iraq Fatality Investigations unit. Such vexatious and spurious hounding of veterans and soldiers, with the use of taxpayers’ money, is entirely unacceptable and represents a betrayal of their commitment to their country.

Stephen Kerr: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for giving way; he is making a powerful speech. What effect does the persecution of those who have served our country in conflict have on the morale of our armed forces?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend asks a pertinent question. It utterly diminishes the faith that our servicemen and women have in the Government’s commitment to minding soldiers’ backs. Soldiers deploy with the good faith that, no matter what, as long as they act honourably, the Government will back them up. Of course, soldiers expect to be held to the highest standard with regard to the law. That is the case with Major Robert Campbell and others. He has endured an inquiry into this historical allegation seven times over, and each time he has been exonerated. By great coincidence, just a few weeks ago he was awarded the Long Service and Good Conduct medal, and then he got a call to say—can you believe it?—that an eighth inquiry was under way. This situation must end.

I call on the Minister to tell the House in his concluding remarks how much the MOD spends on the Iraq Fatality Investigations unit; how many servicemen and women are undergoing investigation at this time; how many have been previously cleared of allegations against them; and what immediate steps the Department will take to bring about the end of the use of MOD money to pursue soldiers and veterans in this way.

The military thrives because there is an absolute bond of trust between those who serve and those who govern. If that is in any way undermined, it would be a huge dereliction of the Government’s duty to maintain that essential bond. I hope that the Government will act decisively, in the best interests of our soldiers, veterans, military community and our country as a whole.

6.48 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) on his introduction to the debate. I agree with him that it is important to secure more such opportunities to discuss defence and how it is financed.

I do not think that anyone who follows the defence world and the way that the MOD has conducted itself over the past few years would conclude that the situation is anything other than dire. It is fair to say that the new Secretary of State realises that as well. There is also, however, a collective sense of acute amnesia, certainly among those who were Government Members in 2010, about how we arrived at this position. It is clear that the mess that the defence budget is in today is a direct result of policies taken by the coalition Government and the present Conservative Government. Seven years of ill-thought-through, rushed cuts and, on occasion, very bad decisions are now coming home to roost. The new Defence Secretary has the unfortunate task of sorting it out—a task that I do not envy, to say the least. It is therefore worth recappping how we have arrived at this position.

The Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), said that these were not political decisions. They were political decisions that led directly to the mess we have today. To ignore that is to avoid the evidence and means that we will not learn lessons for the future for how we manage our nation’s defence. In 2010, the new Conservative-led coalition implemented a number of deep cuts to the armed forces. The right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), the then Defence Secretary, justified them by claiming that the defence budget had a £38 billion black hole, which somehow meant that rash and direct action would have to be taken straightaway. No one knows how he arrived at £38 billion. I have asked Ministers in this House to explain it on numerous occasions. The NAO and the Defence Committee could not arrive at a £38 billion black hole either, but it was used in every debate as the reason why cuts to our defence budget had to be made.

The Government stopped using the figure after a while, when they realised they could not justify it. I think it came about from a clear misinterpretation of the 2009 NAO report on major projects started under the previous Labour Government. The report was a snapshot of cost increases in 2009 and related primarily to the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers, the A400M transport aircraft and the Astute submarine programme.

Mrs Moon: I just wish to correct a mistake by my hon. Friend: he missed out the word “deliberate” before “misinterpretation”. I am sure he did not mean to, but it was a deliberate misinterpretation.

Mr Jones: It was a deliberate strategy, in the Cameron- Osborne Conservative party, to ignore the facts and spin—“If we keep saying it long enough, people will believe it.”

The 2009 NAO report said that if the equipment budget was not increased at all over 10 years, it might be possible to arrive at a figure of £36 billion. How did they then get an extra £2 billion? I think the then Defence Secretary just added some personnel revenue costs to get to the £38 billion figure. What the report actually said, however—this point was completely ignored—was that the scenario envisaged, of the budget remaining constant in real terms over the 10-year period, would lead to a £6 billion funding gap, which could have been managed over that 10-year period.
My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) is right. The impression was given to the public, and to everyone else who wanted to hear this spin, that the £38 billion had to be found in year straightaway. That was a clear fabrication. We know that, because when the current Chancellor became Defence Secretary, following the resignation of the right hon. Member for North Somerset after two years, he suddenly announced that the black hole had disappeared. I do not know whether he was auditioning for his current job as Chancellor, but the idea that it is possible to get rid of a £38 billion in-year black hole in the defence budget in just two years is complete nonsense.

The Conservative Government used that as a smokescreen to allow them to cut the defence budget, as part of the Chancellor’s austerity drive, by 16%. The effect of that has been some of the decisions referred to earlier on, including the scrapping of capability such as Nimrod. Making people compulsorily redundant in our armed forces was completely inexcusable. Certainly, if the Government I was a member of had done that when I was a Defence Minister, we would have been rightly condemned. I was a Defence Minister, we would have been rightly condemned, I think that will be the case if the Conservative Front-Bench team—the right hon. Member for New Forest East was part of it—when we are in government, I remember the hue and cry from every Conservative politician. If I had been asked for more money, which the budget clearly needs, we are to fit the budgets, one would have thought that the world had stopped. If I had been asked for more money, which the budget clearly needs, we are to fit the budgets, one would have thought that the world had stopped. I think that will be the case if we are to fit the budgets. May I ask a retired senior general, “Who came up with the figure of £20 million. From looking at the headlines and at the newspaper reports, it seems that the Secretary of State needs to look not just at the decision takes by the Government, but at some of the ill-thought-out decisions. Take the P-8, for example. Buying off the shelf from the United States might look like a simple solution, but as I understand it, it is not clear what weapon system will go on it. Lo and behold, when I looked at the Ministry of Defence budget, I saw that there was no budget line for it at all—it has a £1.3 billion price tag on it—so again, how will it be paid for?

Some decisions in 2015 were very strange. The Navy has mentioned, and I accept that naval platforms are far more capable than they were 10 or 20—and certainly 50—years ago, but people are fixated on the number of hulls. The Government came up with the novel idea of having a cheap alternative through the Type 31e. This was literally just to deal with the idea that we have a certain number of hulls. I asked what the Type 31e is capable of doing. It cannot do NATO tasks and it is not as capable as the Type 45 as it is configured, so we will have to redevelop the programme, adding more costs in. This is about looking at whether we have to revisit some decisions and take things out of the budget. I think that will be the case if we are to fit the budgets.

The issue of numbers is always contentious. When we were in government, I remember the hue and cry from the Conservative Front-Bench team—the right hon. Member for New Forest East was part of it—when we froze training days for the Territorial Army. The cost was £20 million. From looking at the headlines and at the way some Conservative politicians were going on, one would have thought that the world had stopped. If the Labour Government had slashed the defence budget by 16% and sacked people or made them redundant, as this Government have, they clearly would have been condemned.

I was a Defence Minister, we would have been rightly condemned, I think that will be the case if we are to fit the budgets.
It is the same old story. I understand the point that the right hon. Member for New Forest East made about arguing for defence—I have argued consistently for it in this House—but these are political decisions. When I was in the Ministry of Defence in 2010, I did not hear Conservative politicians stand up and say, “No, we do not need extra expenditure.” We were being condemned because we were not spending enough. In 2010, I did not see a single poster or anything in the Conservative manifesto saying, “We are going to slash the defence budget by 16%,” but these are the real facts and we cannot ignore them.

Let me turn to recruitment, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend touched upon. I do not like to say, “I told you so,” but the decision on the Capita contract for recruitment was criticised at the time. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling raised complaints, asking why armed forces personnel were being taken out of recruitment centres and why such centres were being closed in some areas. The position we find ourselves in now was bound to happen. We have heard some of the stories. The recruitment process is not only taking a year, but given the rate at which people are being failed, it is no wonder the Government are not meeting the targets. It is now time to revisit the contract and put uniformed personnel back into recruitment centres. The Capita contract should be scrapped, because it is completely failing to deliver what was outlined.

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Mr Francois: Before the hon. Gentleman moves on from recruitment, may I ask whether he accepts that the other main problem with Army recruitment is the very large number of people who are being failed on medical grounds, often for very minor medical ailments that date back to their childhood? For instance, in the year to February 2017, some 10,600 people—both regular and reserves—who wanted to join the Army were told, “No, you cannot join on medical grounds.” At the same time, the regular Army was 3,000 recruits short. Does he believe that the MOD should look at that area again?

Mr Jones: That situation was predictable when the system was set up. What is worse, I have heard stories about young people who have nearly got to the end of the selection process but do not get called back in, but then get a telephone call from some Capita call centre, saying, “I’m sorry, you’ve failed. That is it.” I am sorry, but that is not the way to treat people who have tried to join the armed forces.

The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) makes a good point. When we had senior non-commissioned officers stationed in recruitment offices, they could work out how to handle the recruits and use their breadth of experience to explain what life in the armed forces is like. This situation could have been avoided. Unless something has changed radically in the last few years with injuries, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I had case in which someone had a childhood knee injury. That person had to wait six months for a decision and then the knee injury was flagged up as the reason why he could not join the armed forces. That cannot be acceptable.

Mr Sweeney: To give a personal example, I joined the Territorial Army back in 2006 with a good friend, who went on to serve in Afghanistan. He left the reserves and when he sought to rejoin, he was disqualified on medical grounds. That is someone who had actually served in Afghanistan and who did not have any obvious injuries.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend raises a very good case from personal experience. This needs to be looked at. If I would scrap the contract and take it back in house. The old system perhaps needed tweaking, but it was delivering.

Mr Francois: I am sorry to hammer the nail, but this is very important, and we have the Secretary of State on the Front Bench at the moment to hear this. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that in some cases, people have been failed and prevented from joining the Army for relatively minor issues such as asthma? Paula Radcliffe and Sir Chris Hoy would have failed on the same grounds.

Mr Jones: That prompts the question, “How are the tests being done, what criteria are being used and how are they being interpreted?” The problem is partly that if we have a civilised and, as it has been described to me, bureaucratic, tick-box process, common sense does not kick in, and perhaps common sense is what we need as well.

The problem is that we need to look at the size of our armed forces from a strategic point of view. What do we actually need? A decision was taken suddenly that the answer was 82,000—the Army was told that that is what it would get because the budget required it—but we need to look at the strategic needs of our armed forces. Members of the Royal Navy are under severe pressure in terms of deployment. With smaller numbers, there is a bigger turnover of individuals. In addition, people are doing constant back-to-back tours, which is not good for morale or family life. If that is happening, the chances of people staying long term will clearly be affected.

We need to look at our Navy. The idea that we have a Navy that cannot deploy and that we have ships that are laid up—my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling said that we are not deploying ships—is a damning indictment. The sight this week of HMS Mersey, an offshore patrol vessel, escorting three Russian vessels through the English channel summed it up in one. We need to think seriously about what we need. The hon. Member for Gainsborough said that we are a maritime nation, and that it is about not just kit, but people.
Vernon Coaker: My hon. Friend makes a good point. If we do exactly what he says, we will be in a ludicrous position. We will be saying, “To facilitate scrapping Albion and Bulwark, we will modify our aircraft carriers, which takes us into the realms of never-never land. What does that mean? We are not going to do a beach landing from an aircraft carrier. We might have a few more helicopters or a dry dock facility, but the idea of carrying out an amphibious landing from an aircraft carrier belies the point of having amphibious craft, which is to land on beaches and lay marines off on them.

Mr Jones: I do not disagree with my hon. Friend, but that goes to the point—this was the problem back in 2010—of the Treasury being let in the door of the MOD, and being in control and in the driving seat. When I was a Minister, I chaired the finance group in the MOD when we were looking for savings and dealing with the Treasury, I know exactly what Ministers are dealing with. The Treasury does not understand the value of our armed forces and how they operate. I am glad that the Secretary of State seems to have wrestled control of that element back. If our defence policy is determined by Treasury figures, we will have very strange decisions that will not match strategic needs.

We keep hearing from the Government that they are meeting the NATO 2%. As someone who is committed to NATO and who supports it—I am a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly—I can say that that is an academic argument. It is important in that we are trying to get people to spend a minimum of 2%, but it is also important to look at what our NATO partners spend that 2% on. It is clear that the Government have rejigged the figures. I am not saying that they have done something illegal or anything like that, but in 2015, they changed how defence spending was calculated. War pensions of £820 million were included; assessments of contributions to UN peacekeeping of £400 million were included; and the pensions of retired military personnel, which was another £200 million, were included. The thick end of £1 billion of that 2% is made up of things that the hardiest defender of Government policy would not think were frontline defence commitments.

It is about being realistic. It would be fine if we were spending only 1.8% on defence but spending it on the right things. There is a case for increasing the defence budget—that argument was made by the right hon. Member for New Forest East and by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on securing it in this year’s series of debates on estimates. They have long been strong champions of our armed forces and are rightly proud of Britain’s history of defence.

That pride is not misplaced. This country has the fifth-largest defence budget in the world. I have the honour of representing two military bases in my constituency—Kinloss barracks and RAF Lossiemouth. Moray has a long history of service, and the armed forces are intertwined in our local communities. In the last year alone, servicemen and women from the two bases in Moray have served in South Sudan, the Falkland Islands and Romania, and in Cyprus as part of the international efforts against Daesh in Iraq and Syria. Scotland and indeed Moray have long benefited from the UK’s defence budget, and the defence industry is one of Scotland’s great success stories.

I am delighted that, in the numbers we are discussing, we can see that investment will continue to increase. Defence spending is due to rise by 3% in real terms over the next year, which is an increase of more than £1 billion. We will feel that investment directly in Moray. The arrival of nine P-8 Poseidon aircraft at Lossiemouth will mean 400 extra jobs and investment of £400 million. There can be no doubt that the Government remain strong on their commitment to the defence of our country. I look forward to seeing the positive impact that that new capability will bring to Moray.

On Thursday, I look forward to welcoming the Secretary of State for Defence to the official turf-cutting ceremony for the new Poseidon strategic facility at RAF Lossiemouth. I also commend the work he has embarked on since taking up his position. His recently announced defence modernisation programme provides the perfect opportunity to assess our spending. I know that he will not shy away from the difficult decisions that need to be taken to safeguard the future of our world-class armed forces.

Vernon Coaker: You’ve got the job.

Douglas Ross: If there is a job going, I will take it.

I should like to touch briefly on an extremely pertinent issue currently affecting MOD personnel—serving and civilian—based in Scotland. The budget confirmed by the SNP Government last week raises taxes for anyone earning more than £33,000 in Scotland. It will also mean that someone serving in Scotland at the same rank and doing the same job as someone in England will pay more tax if they earn more than just £26,000. That is simply unfair and unacceptable. To put that in perspective, everyone above the rank of lance corporal will pay more in Scotland, as will every single Royal Navy officer. That is an attack on our hard-working service personnel and a kick in the teeth for all those who have chosen to serve our country. I thank the Minister and the Secretary of State for their communications—they met my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) and I to discuss the issue. I make another plea on behalf of MOD personnel in Scotland. The “Nat tax” is unfair and cannot be allowed to stand, and I call on the
UK Government to use the powers available to them to mitigate the worst effects of that ill-thought-through tax rise.

We are a military nation, and Scotland is proud to play its part in that. Moray is a fantastic example of what Government investment in defence looks like, and we will continue to play our part in the defence of our nation and our interests around the world. Under this Government, and with a rising defence budget next year, I have no doubt that Lossiemouth, Kinloss, and our capabilities around the globe will continue to go from strength to strength.

7.20 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):
Thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the debate, Mr Speaker. Let me also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for their efforts in securing the debate, and for their persistent scrutiny of the Government on defence matters, which has been of long-standing note in the House.

It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), whose constituency is the home of the Royal Air Force in Scotland—although, sadly, it has been much diminished since only a few years ago, when Kinloss was home to the RAF’s fleet of marine patrol aircraft. That yawning capability gap is just one of the many litany of defence cuts that we have seen in the past few years, so I do not entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman’s glowing review of the trajectory of British defence capability in recent years. That speech aside, however, I have been struck by the consistent level of shock and dismay expressed about the extent of the reduction in Britain’s defence capabilities.

It is an established fact that there has been a steady decline in defence spending as a percentage of GDP. It has fallen from 2.4% in 2011 to 1.9% in 2016. Not only has it declined every year under the present Government, but it is lower than it was in any year under the last Labour Government, which rather puts paid to the claim that there has been an increase in real terms in 2015-16 the defence inflation rate was 3.9%, the highest rate since 2010, while the national GDP deflator was just 0.8%. We only know that because the Ministry of Defence calculates the figures in conjunction with the Treasury, but, as the defence analyst Francis Tusa recently noted, the MOD and the Treasury stopped calculating them last year, so the visibility of the real purchasing power of defence has now been lost. We must recover that visibility as a matter of urgency, because it is the only way in which we can really scrutinise the trajectory of defence purchasing power. I hope that the Secretary of State will commit himself to discussions with the Treasury about the reinstatement of the calculation, because it is vital for us to have the information in order to plan ahead.

In recent months the Army has been cut by a fifth, wages have been frozen for a sustained period, and—as we heard from the hon. Member for Gainsborough—no Royal Navy ships were on patrol in international waters over Christmas, which is shocking and unheard of in recent history. All that can be attributed to the funding gap of £21 billion in the equipment programme, which shows how underfunded that programme is, and reveals the gap in defence spending overall.

I referred earlier to the relentless decline in defence spending in recent years. It peaked at £45 billion in real terms in 2009-10, the last year of the Labour Government. Although it has been suggested today that there is currently a £10 billion gap, I calculate that if the trajectory of an average of, say, 1.7% had been maintained rather than cut, we would have seen real-terms spending of £53 billion by 2020 rather than the £37 billion that has been projected. According to my calculation, the real funding gap is £16 billion rather than £10 billion. Members may feel free to correct me, but I believe that if we extrapolate the trend of defence spending before the cuts started in 2010, we see substantially more defence spending. Perhaps that shows just how critical the situation is, and demonstrates the reality of the root cause of the cuts.

The present position is both absurd and depressing. We know what the solutions are, and addressing them is a matter of political will. The key themes of the debate have concerned the chronic underfunding of defence, and the failure to recognise the uniqueness of defence industrial capability and understand how we can get the most out of it. The hon. Member for Gainsborough asked whether we were getting the bang for our buck that we ought to be getting, and what capability we received per pound in comparison with our peer countries around the world. That is a critical question, and I think that we, as a country, should investigate it. How can we secure maximum capability? I suggest that we think that we, as a country, should investigate it. How can we secure maximum capability? I suggest that we can largely blame the way in which defence is financed.

When I was in the shipbuilding industry, we designed and built complex warships such as Type 26 frigates. We were massively constrained by the arbitrary limits placed on capital expenditure. Like many other Members, I take issue with that. When a programme of that kind is being commissioned—possibly the most complex and the largest-scale defence equipment programme, indeed the largest-scale engineering programme, undertaken anywhere in the world—imposing of arbitrary annual limits on spending is ridiculous. We ought to finance such programmes in the same way as we finance other critical national infrastructure programmes, such as HS2, Crossrail and the Olympic games.
Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that when equipment such as ships is being ordered, the payback to the Exchequer in tax should be taken into account and the jobs should not be exported?

Mr Sweeney: Absolutely. My hon. Friend has made an excellent and salient point. He and I are both members of the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair, which is currently undertaking a study of that issue. According to another study, conducted by the Fraser of Allander Institute at the University of Strathclyde, the overall benefit to the UK economy per annum from the shipbuilding industry on the Clyde alone is £366 million a year, in purely multiplier effects. As for the idea that we can competitively tender programmes overseas, we are losing the opportunity of industrial benefit as well. We are not just talking about the loss of core capabilities; we are talking about the loss of revenue and economic potential for our country.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I know that the hon. Gentleman has no intention of being churlish or unhelpful. He will, I am sure, acknowledge that having a shipbuilding strategy, together with a maritime growth strategy, is a particular feature of this Government, which marks them out from their predecessors of all political persuasions.

Mr Sweeney: I do not accept that point. It was a Labour Government who, in 2005, introduced the first defence industrial strategy, which defined a far more robust way of delivering shipbuilding capability in the UK. It defined key industrial capabilities, and that is sorely lacking from the Government’s current shipbuilding strategy. I hope that there will be some improvement as a result of the ongoing discussions on the matter.

Mr Hayes: I cannot believe that the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood me. Perhaps I did not explain myself carefully enough. I commissioned the maritime growth study, and it was the first for donkeys’ years, so I am not quite sure what the hon. Gentleman means.

Mr Sweeney: That may have been a discrete maritime growth strategy, but the overall defence industrial strategy encompassed maritime aspects. However, I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s efforts in that regard, and I hope that we can work constructively to improve the strategy in the manner that I suggested.

The funding of large-scale equipment programmes must be revisited as a matter of urgency, because it is not sustainable. The annual limits on key programmes that are multi-generational cannot be allowed to continue. When we were looking at the programme for the construction of the Type 26, we wanted to invest potentially half a billion pounds in reinvigorating the infrastructure that would support it, but because of the arbitrary in-year spending profile we could not invest in the infrastructure and facilities that would have benefited the programme throughout its life cycle, and we therefore lost that long-term benefit. For the sake of short-term savings, we are losing long-term efficiency in the generation of defence capability. That may be an answer to the question from the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), and the hon. Members for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), for North Durham (Mr Jones) and for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney). Simply put, I agree that more needs to be spent on the defence of our nation, and that the continued speculation about cuts to capability and manpower not only weakens us in the eyes of our allies, but does untold grievous damage to the morale of our men and women serving today. I also want to mention something that has not been touched on this afternoon. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) and others for their tireless campaign to get more help and investment into mental health support for serving personnel, and to the MOD for the announcement this weekend of the creation of the new helpline operated by Combat Stress.

Today, however, I want to raise something different, which I estimate would cost the UK Government very little money at all. All Members are aware of the current problems in recruitment to the armed forces. I know that a great deal of time and effort is going into revamping and modernising the recruitment process and the new recruitment campaign. However, there is one group of people that, apart from in the rarest of circumstances, is very unlikely to be found in the ranks of the Army, the Navy or the Air Force: subjects from the British overseas territories. These territories are British by choice and their residents are British subjects. However, despite being loyal citizens and holders of a British passport, and being fit and able and willing, individuals are still ineligible to serve in the armed forces of this country unless they have resided on the British mainland for five whole years.

Let us put that into perspective. That means that an 18-year-old Falklander or Gibraltar who wanted, like his compatriots on these islands, to have a rewarding career in the armed forces would be forced to move to the UK mainland and live, and presumably work, here until the age of 23 before being eligible to join up. Some might argue that, for example, the Royal Gibraltar Regiment and the Falklands Island Defence Force give the chance for rewarding careers in the armed forces for citizens of overseas territories, but if they wanted to join the Royal Navy, the Royal Marines, the Air Force or any regiment in the regular British Army they would be prevented from doing so for five whole years simply by virtue of not residing in these islands long enough. I put it to the House that that is not only daft, but is
The armed forces of our country have been engaged in continuous operations for the last couple of decades, yet at the same time—particularly in the last seven to eight years—we have been dealing with a sustained programme of deficit reduction. That has not been mentioned in this debate in connection with the financing of our armed forces. The stress and strain that this has placed on our military is manifest as we ask them not only to do more in the world, but to do a more varied set of tasks while managing with fewer resources. This asks a lot of the men and women who wear the Queen’s uniform, but they wear it with commitment and pride, which is worthy of our respect. They put themselves on a path of service that puts them in harm’s way—sometimes in deadly harm’s way—on our behalf, and we should not forget that.

However, we should have gratitude not only to the men and women of our armed forces, but to those who support them in the supply chain. I am proud to have visited, and spent time with, the men and women who work at the Babcock military vehicle and armament repair facility at Forthside in Stirling. They told me their stories of deployment alongside our troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. They are, in their way, as heroic and dedicated to the cause of defending our United Kingdom as the enlisted men and women, and their sacrifice and work is worthy of our celebration. These contractors and suppliers who support our military in theatre are a vital cog in the machine of our defences. It is one of our jobs in this Parliament to ensure that our military is well served by these contractors. The MOD would do well to remember its role as the customer and better leverage its authority as a customer with these contractors. I believe that there is room for improvement in that area in terms of value of money.

At present, there is a threat hanging over the future of vehicle and armament repairs in Scotland. I hope that Ministers will take the opportunity provided by this debate to confirm that the MOD expects such repairs to be carried out in Scotland in future. I very much regret that as things stand I appear to have failed to convince the MOD to exercise its voice of customer with Babcock and to site the mobile defence support group unit for Scotland in my constituency. I very much regret that as things stand I appear to have failed to convince the MOD to exercise its voice of customer with Babcock and to site the mobile defence support group unit for Scotland in my constituency. That is a wrong decision, especially given the calibre of the highly skilled and extremely loyal workforce, whose support of our armed forces included, as I have said, regular and repeated tours of duty in war zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq. These workers are my constituents and I believe they deserve better from the MOD.

We cannot go on asking our armed forces to have the level and reach of the operational commitments we lay on them and expect of them while continuing to cut back on the resources available to them. I have a simple but effective slogan to summarise my position and that of a great many other Members across the House: no more cuts.

I turn to other matters. We should be very wary of Russia. I have a strong feeling for Russia, as you might know, Mr Deputy Speaker, because my son Luke, who is a constituent of yours, served two years in Novosibirsk in Siberia as a voluntary representative of our church. Over the two years he was there, he became very fluent in Russian and became a great lover of all things Russian, in particular the people of Russia. He has shared his enthusiasm for Russia with all his family, including me,
and I have had the opportunity to experience the warmth and hospitality of the Russian people myself. However, the issue of Russian nationalism is a different story, as it is with the nationalism that has emerged all around the world. Nationalism is a destructive force that divides people and pits ethnicities and national identities against one another. Fundamentally, it is a poisonous ideology wherever it is found, and although it is often disguised in modern times, it is still a threat to our way of life and to the security and peace of the world. We must be ready to meet nationalism head on, to challenge it and to defend its victims.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Given what the hon. Gentleman has just said, does he support ending the Olympics, which are a competition between nations? There is a bit of nationalism there. End the Olympics!

Stephen Kerr: There is a great difference between nationalism and patriotism, which is far more wholesome. It is no mistake that the leader of the Scottish National party herself has said that she very much regrets the fact that the word “national” is to be found in the SNP’s party name. But I am not here to talk about the SNP, disappointed though its Members will be to hear that. I urge Ministers across Government to take seriously the direct warning by General Sir Nick Carter that Russia poses a major threat that the UK would struggle to confront without an increase in defence spending.

I also want to mention recruitment. I believe that subcontracting recruitment to a civilian business was not a good decision. Such recruitment cannot be determined by someone working with a spreadsheet, and I seriously doubt that any private company has what it takes to function as an adequate recruitment agent for the British armed forces.

Housing for our armed forces is also an issue. Some of the anecdotal stories shared with me about living conditions for service families are, quite frankly, nothing less than shameful. However, that is too broad an issue to be covered in the time available tonight.

We also need to be sure that our troops have the right equipment at the right time. There is a black hole in the budget, as has been admitted. We have laid orders for equipment that we do not have the money to pay for. If we are not careful—I say this as a member of the Select Committee investigating Carillion—we will find ourselves in a situation of robbing Peter to pay Paul that will become a vicious circle, and we all know where that will lead to.

Vernon Coaker: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the difficulties that we can get into when we rob Peter to pay Paul. The Defence Secretary recently told the Defence Committee, in discussing the £300 million needed to support the development of the at-sea nuclear deterrent and the critically important Dreadnought programme:

“We have had to make sacrifices elsewhere in order to ensure that the programme keeps going”.

That is what this debate has been all about, and the hon. Gentleman is right to make that point.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, my colleague on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, for making that point.

In regard to capabilities, I very much regret the fact that the Royal Navy does not have the number of surface vessels that it requires to send both our aircraft carriers to sea at the same time with the prerequisite level of air and submarine protection. I lay that before the House as an example of the capability issues that we face. We further need to be sure that we are meeting the needs of modern warfare, as has been mentioned several times. The UK is vulnerable to cyber-attack, which presents a clear and present danger in terms of the peer-to-peer threat that we are living under.

Addressing these issues will require resources and a new range of skills for defence and for counter-attack. That is why I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement a few weeks ago of the defence modernisation programme review. It seems to me that this review came about because he was faced with a choice between two sets of unpalatable cuts. Our armed forces are not only an emblem of our national pride that symbolises our national values; they are also a vital tool to project British values across the world. I believe, as a Conservative Member of Parliament, that no Conservative Secretary of State for Defence should contemplate undermining our defences further with more cuts. We must give our armed forces the reassurance and the resources that they need to do the job, and an increase in the defence budget should be forthcoming.

7.45 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It normally falls to the Scottish National party to break the consensual mood of these debates, but I fear that the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) has somewhat jumped our gun in that respect. Some of what he had to say was useful, but I will take no lectures on patriotism from a party that is presiding over the housing crisis that he describes, the recruitment crisis that he describes, or indeed the morale crisis that has been adumbrated by so many Members tonight. It takes a bit more than jumping on a tank with a Union Jack to be taken seriously on these issues.

Returning to the consensual points, however, I would like to thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and congratulate him on bringing forward this estimates debate. He eloquently highlighted the miasma of despair that hangs over the finances in the Ministry of Defence, just as we have done fairly frequently in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall. I half-joked with the Government Whip earlier that the speech I am about to make was the same one I have been making for the past five months—[Interruption.] I have no intention of sitting down! I mean no disrespect to the colleagues who also take part in these debates, but much of what has been said this afternoon and this evening has been said before. And no doubt the response will be the same. We will be told that we have to wait for the review of the new defence modernisation programme, that is something that we look forward to engaging in.

In one of my sadder moments, one night when I was suffering from insomnia, I was looking for something to listen to on Radio 4 when I came across a programme from 2011 featuring an interview with the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), who was the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee at the time. It was a programme on defence procurement.
Anyone listening to that programme tonight—I am sure that many Members will want to go and do just that when they leave the Chamber—would be forgiven for thinking that that interview was conducted last week. So dreadful is the state and condition of defence financing that we are repeating the same problems over and over again. I genuinely want to make a contribution that offers an alternative to the way in which the financing is done, so that we can avoid the shambles that the National Audit Office pointed out only a couple of weeks ago. I will return to that in a moment.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes a good point. Other hon. Members have raised the point—I think it is worth repeating, and I know that Ministers will hear it with some sympathy—that when it comes to defence spending, the housing that is provided for service personnel and particularly for their families is of critical importance. A number of my constituents have approached me about the housing conditions in Leuchars, and I hope that my hon. Friend will urge the Minister to look into this to ensure that military bases are as family-friendly as possible.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am quite confident that the Minister has heard my hon. Friend’s point, and that he will do just that. I shall go on to talk about the equipment plan report, but I think another National Audit Office report came out the day before that one, which covered the Amington deal on military housing. Admittedly, that does not affect Scotland, but the report states that if that deal had not been signed by the Conservative Government in, I think, 1996, the taxpayer could have saved some £4 billion. We could undoubtedly have had better military housing as a result.

I want to offer an alternative to the financing model, to which I have alluded in the past. The model that is used in Sweden and Denmark involves longer projections for funding and reaching defence agreements that last more than just 12 months. The Danish model, which admittedly is imperfect, has a defence agreement that involves all the political parties. The heat of the politics is taken out of the agreement, allowing the Government to sign up to a funding model lasting somewhere between five and six years, so that even when there is a change of Government, the model can still be adhered to. Obviously, there are caveats, such as that if the Parliament chooses to diverge from the plan, it ultimately has the power to do so, but it means that the Government are not constantly chasing their tail. I would encourage hon. Members who regularly attend these debates to consider that model, which we are certainly keen to see the Government explore.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes a prescient point. At the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy today, the experts were recommending the Danish model as something that the UK should follow, and I am sure that the Ministers are listening to that point.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I would hope that such a model could avoid some of the incredibly alarming passages in the NAO report, which have been highlighted by many right hon. and hon. Members. There is a funding hole in the equipment plan of up to £20 billion. To make that clear, that means that we cannot afford to buy the equipment we say we need in order to keep us safe.

I give all the weight I can to the Ministry of Defence in trying to get it the money that it needs—if not just to stand still, then certainly to move forward—but I do have some criticisms of how the Department has managed to get into this position. Why were the exchange rate projections so badly out—by up to a quarter in some cases?

Mr Kevan Jones: Brexit.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I understand that that was what caused it, but how did the MOD manage to get the calculations so badly wrong? When there is a funding hole of £20 billion just in the MOD’s equipment spending—before we get to estates, personnel and all the rest of it—why is no one being hauled over the coals? I cannot think of another Minister or Department that would be allowed to get away with that, but it is due to a fundamental problem in how this Government, this Parliament and Governments over many years have decided to fund defence. It needs radical change. Even if the solution that we think might be helpful is not the perfect solution, something has to give, because the situation is unsustainable. The NAO is clear that the result is that projects must be cancelled, delayed or scaled back. I therefore ask the Minister to make it clear to the House which projects are to be cancelled, delayed or scaled back. Can we have a guarantee that not a single project in Scotland will be cancelled, delayed or scaled back, because that is the road that the NAO says the UK Government is heading down?

The situation adumbrates the need for a new SDSR—one that takes account of the change in currency fluctuations and of the fact that Britain will no longer be in the European Union. Our current security policy is based on our being members of the EU, so we need a new one that takes account of the fact that we are coming out, because that undermines operational capability.

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about the impact on real defence spending of things such as currency fluctuations. We are talking about the need for stability in the defence budget and for it to be fiscally neutral, which I think was the term used by the Secretary of State, so should the Treasury not give special dispensation to the MOD so that it is pegged to a certain real level of spending, which would be an automatic stabiliser that rises and falls automatically with changing valuations or with defence inflation rates?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: There is nothing that I could add to make that point any better. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

Vernon Coaker: The hon. Gentleman poses an interesting question. There was an SDSR in 2015, and the modernising defence programme, which will presumably have consequences, is going to be announced in the next few months. Just to be clear about what he is saying, is his argument that there should be another SDSR at the end of the five-year period in 2020 or before that?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I rather suspect that I cannot get the Government not to go ahead with its modernising defence programme. My preference would
be for a proper SDSR, rather than this mini review, but we are where we are. Despite the supposed lifting of the fiscally neutral element, I fear that we are heading in the same direction. The hon. Gentleman will remember the statement: three of the four announcements were cuts. Let us not dress that up in any other language; they were cuts. I fully expect that to happen again when the announcement comes later in the year.

Setting aside our views on whether we should have the nuclear deterrent, the other alarming aspect of the NAO report is its rising cost. All of a sudden, it has gone up by £1 billion—overnight, it seems. It has gone up by so much that the MOD’s director general nuclear is having to review the costings, so I would welcome some information on when that review will happen, when an announcement will be made and when Parliament can expect to get the information.

I want to end on a note of consensus, so my final point is that the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) made the very good point, with which I can find no reason to disagree, about making it easier for people from the British overseas territories to join up, instead of making them wait five years, which would be eminently sensible given the existing recruitment problems. Those problems have been well documented in the House, not least by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) —I have just learned that I have been mispronouncing his constituency the entire time, but he is such a gent that he has not even told me.

This has been an important and informed debate, as it always is, and the House is better informed as a result. We look forward to the results of the mini defence review and to engaging with it. As the Secretary of State knows, the Scottish National party hopes that there will be a particular focus on the activity, or lack of it, in the high north. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in his winding-up speech.

7.56 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I welcome this opportunity to debate the MOD budget, and I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for his part in securing it and for his excellent opening speech. We have heard a number of thoughtful contributions this afternoon, and I hope that Members will forgive me if I do not mention them all individually owing to the lack of time.

It is clear that there is deep dissatisfaction at the state of the defence budget on both sides of the House and a real desire for proper investment in our armed forces and our nation’s defences. We are all used to hearing from Ministers that the defence budget is growing, and I am sure that there will be more of that this evening, but the truth is that years of deep cuts by the coalition and our nation’s defences. I was in Plymouth with my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport...
(Luke Pollard) on Saturday, and there is real concern in that city about the fate of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark. Ministers, including the Defence Secretary just last week, have repeatedly failed to address speculation that those ships will be taken out of service earlier than planned as a way of generating short-sighted savings.

Although I appreciate that the defence review is ongoing and will not report until the summer, the Minister is not precluded from stating categorically that the review will not result in cuts to our amphibious capabilities—cuts that will leave us with significant gaps—and I sincerely urge him to say something this evening.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for visiting Plymouth at the weekend. Does she agree that we not only need to provide certainty for the crews of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, and for the Royal Marines, but we also need to recognise that the sale of HMS Ocean to Brazil has hit morale in the city and is damaging retention in our armed forces?

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend makes a valid point.

It is clear that the work strands of the review will look in detail at the way in which industry does business with the MOD, which is an area where progress can and should be made. It is apparent from responses to the consultation on the defence industrial policy refresh that there is a desire for the MOD to be more flexible and collaborative in setting requirements, as well as in engaging with industry at an earlier stage in the procurement process.

Opposition Members would also like the definition of “good value” to be expanded to include wider employment, industrial or economic factors when making procurement decisions and awarding contracts. There have been a few nods in that direction from Ministers, and we welcome the reference to it in the national shipbuilding strategy, but the defence industrial policy refresh is extremely disappointing, in that it fails to make any such changes.

The Select Committee also called for a broader definition of “value for money”. This call has received the support of the trade body ADS, as well as defence trade unions such as Unite and Prospect, so I would be grateful if the Minister could explain why the MOD has decided not to pursue such changes.

There is also strong support within industry for fair and open competition, wherever possible, when making procurement decisions. The Secretary of State reflected that in general terms before the Select Committee recently, but there has been no firm commitment that the contract for the new mechanised infantry vehicles will be subject to open competition. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm this evening that this really will be the case.

The MOD budget has also taken a substantial hit due to the sharp fall in the value of sterling following the EU referendum. The Department faces a real challenge given that so much of the equipment plan is denominated in foreign currencies. That is made worse by the fact that the MOD has, for some reason, used exchange rates that do not reflect current market rates—something that the NAO identifies as a risk to the plan.

Of course, one reason for the collapse in the value of the pound is a clear lack of investor confidence because of how this Government are handling the Brexit negotiations. The Opposition firmly believe that a clear commitment to negotiating a customs union with the European Union would provide the certainty that industry and investors need that they will not be hit by burdensome and unnecessary tariff barriers when Britain leaves the EU.

That is particularly important for defence companies, which depend on pan-European supply chains and simply cannot afford to see barriers to trade imposed between Britain and our European partners. But the Government have recklessly decided, point blank, to rule out a customs union, in a move that seems clearly designed to appease the hard right of the Conservative party rather than reflect the interests of our economy and workers in the defence industry.

Finally, as well as the severe challenges to the MOD budget in the here and now, there is also the spectre of massive potential costs coming down the line for forces accommodation. As the NAO’s recent report highlights, the Conservatives’ decision to privatise the housing of service personnel and their families in 1996 has been a disaster from start to finish.

The Conservatives ignored repeated warnings at the time, including from my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), that this sell-off of public assets would not deliver value for money, and now we learn that the deal may have cost the taxpayer up to £4.2 billion. That has left us in a ridiculous position whereby the Government now rent back the same accommodation at increased cost. The MOD will be held over a barrel if the company demands costly rent rises when the lease is up for renewal in 2021. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out exactly how the Government plan to manage the lease renewal process in a way that does not simply result in further unnecessary costs to the taxpayer.

There is support on both sides of the House for real investment in our national security and for an end to the short-sighted and painful cuts that have marred the last seven years. We cannot do security on the cheap. It is time for this Government to deliver the proper investment in defence that the British public expect.

8.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate. As others have done, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for securing the debate. I believe the Procedure Committee and the Liaison Committee were both involved in setting this new precedent for discussing estimates.

It is interesting that this debate was preceded by an urgent question on the situation in Syria. A number of options, ideas and proposals were put forward by Members on both sides of the House, and we should remind ourselves that we are able to make such proposals only because we have the hard power that allows us to stand up in this world. There is a question as to whether we use that hard power, but it does allow us to affect the world around us as a force for good.
In praising our armed forces, it is important that we pay tribute not only to those in uniform but to those who support them: the wives, the partners, the husbands, the children and the entire armed forces community. We, Parliament and the nation, pride ourselves on their incredible professionalism and sense of duty. They are among the best in the world—disciplined, reliable, committed, brave and very well equipped and trained—and we thank them for their incredible service.

The majority of people come out of the armed forces better for it, and our nation is certainly better for their service and for what they do in civilian life once their work is complete. It has been mentioned that we perhaps do not pay tribute to or acknowledge the work that is done across the world. Operations are taking place not just in the obvious—Iraq and Syria—but in Afghanistan and Africa. We are helping to stabilise nations, and we are helping those nations to become strong so that they can make a mark on their own future.

As we have heard today, the MOD budget sits at about £36 billion this year, and it will increase by 0.5% above inflation each year. We have the largest defence budget in Europe and the second largest in NATO, and we should remind ourselves that not all NATO countries are meeting the target. Fifteen out of 29 NATO members spend only 1.5% of their GDP on defence.

Toby Perkins: The Minister is right in what he says, so what pressure is the UK putting on those other NATO nations, both diplomatically and publicly, to get them up to the 2%? I would like to see a lot more done, when the Prime Minister is stood with other leaders, to put pressure on them to achieve that.

Mr Ellwood: I am pleased the Defence Secretary is in his place, because this is very much of concern to him, as it is to all of us in the House, and it gets raised regularly. The last time he was in Brussels he raised it, and our allies in the United States are concerned about it too. The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Let us be honest: we know that, for varying reasons, the financial year has been tough. We are grateful to the Treasury for recognising the fiscal pressures the MOD is under and providing an extra £200 million window to allow us to close the books on the financial year 2017-18. I make it clear that this is new money; it is different from the £300 million that has been brought forward to allow us to close the books on the financial year 2017-18.

Looking ahead, there continues to be a lot of debate, as has been expressed today, about the pressures on and size of the armed forces, their annual budget and the 10-year spending plan. I thought it would be helpful to place things into context following the defence and security capability review and the defence modernisation programme, and to flag up some realities that are not for this budget, but which are coming around the corner. The Defence Secretary has spoken of the need to look at outputs, rather than inputs. We must not just set out the number of tanks, ships or personnel that we need; we must first ask ourselves what we actually want to achieve. That leads us to determine the size of our armed forces and the defence posture we wish to show. This should reflect our duties, both domestic and overseas; our ambitions as a force for good; and our international responsibilities as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and lead member of NATO.

We also need to adapt to the changing circumstances, as the threats we face become complex and intertwined. We must recognise that the world has become more dangerous since the publication of the 2015 SDSR. The risks and threats we face are intensifying and diversifying faster than expected, hence the purpose of the defence modernisation programme. It will allow more time to carefully consider how defence works, as well as what defence needs; it will aim to improve how defence operates; and it will focus on achievable efficiency and create different arrangements with suppliers. This modernisation will allow us to take the necessary long-term decisions about our military capability.

For clarity, let me say that the defence modernisation programme consists of four workstreams: the delivery of a robust MOD operating model, creating a leaner and more efficient MOD; a clear plan for efficiencies and business modernisation; a study of how we improve our commercial and industrial strategy, building on, for example, the shipbuilding strategy and the recently announced combat air strategy; and a focus on our defence policy outputs and our military capability—arguably the most important of the four.

John Spellar: That is all well and good, and all long term. Given that, why are the Government not sorting out the Capita contract on recruitment, which is clearly, visibly, obviously and lamentably failing the country, our armed forces and the recruits?

Mr Ellwood: The right hon. Gentleman touches on something that I am not going to disagree with, but it is pertinent to and included in the workstreams I have just mentioned; we will be seeking more efficiencies and business modernisation. That means looking at our relationship with the contractors we work with, in order to improve the service we need to provide for our service personnel.

The work I have described will be led by the MOD, working closely with the National Security Secretariat and the Treasury, and engaging widely with Parliament, think-tanks, academics, defence experts, international allies, the media, devolved Administrations, the defence industry and, of course, the public.

John Spellar: Having all of those other worthy people involved does not get to grips with the problem of the here and now; it is pushing everything off to the right and over the horizon—again. Why will the Department not get a grip of just this programme and sort it out, because it is crippling to our armed forces?

Mr Ellwood: We have a programme—it is not fiscally neutral, as the last study was. This will allow us to make the changes and the recommendations that we need to take forward. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be able to get behind that, in order to make sure we can provide the service and the changes that we need to make, and which our armed forces deserve.

Vernon Coaker: What the Minister has just said is very important. Will he confirm what he just said: this modernisation of defence programme is not fiscally neutral?

Mr Ellwood: I can say it again and I think I am going to say it a bit later, because it is in my speech: I am happy to confirm that it is not fiscally neutral. That is exactly why we are doing this. I am not saying this just because the Defence Secretary is in his place, but the
first thing he recognised was the fact that the capability review was fiscally neutral and it was prohibiting us. We saw a lot of the stuff that came out in the media and so forth. The challenges that that would have imposed on our armed forces were exactly why there was a requirement to look in more detail at what our armed forces are doing. We now have that opportunity and we have to make the case as to what changes we need, what our defence posture is and how we move forward—

**Mr Kevan Jones rose—**

**Mr Ellwood:** I am not going to give way again. If I may, I will make some progress.

Let me make it clear that this approach will allow us to deliver a better understanding of the implications of the new threats. It will confirm what conventional capability is critical and it will place the MOD on a more sustainable, affordable long-term footing, optimising our relationships with the private sector.

**Mr Kevan Jones rose—**

**Mr Ellwood:** I am not giving way at the moment. As I have said, as has the Defence Secretary, the programme is not fiscally neutral. It allows us to expand and propose changes. It will assess the capabilities and the force structure we need to deal with the threats the UK faces. We will then consider the implications for funding.

When the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Defence Secretary met in December to confirm a way forward on the national security capability review and the defence modernisation programme, it was agreed that no changes would be made to our capability until the modernising defence programme was complete. With one eye on next year’s 2018-19 budget, I very much hope that that is still the case. The requirement for the defence modernisation programme is making sure that we understand the financial pressures affecting defence and looking into the future. If it is not the case, there would be no requirement for a defence modernisation programme. As the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff for Military Capability told the Defence Committee last week, we are, unfortunately, seeing cuts to training exercises and

"a general suppression of some force generation across...frontline commands"

I stress that this is being managed without affecting prioritised units which are heading on operations, but if units are not training, it builds up a backlog of diminished capability.

Another issue raised in the Defence Committee last week related to the National Audit Office report on equipment, which cited a £20 billion deficit over the next 10 years. I make it clear that that makes some significant assumptions of risk, many of which will not be realised, and does not factor in the efficiency recommendations that the defence modernisation programme might make. Nevertheless—

**Mr Kevan Jones rose—**

**Mr Ellwood:** I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not listen to what I am saying, because it is important and pertinent. Perhaps he can hold on to his seat for a second and allow me to finish this important point about the NAO report. Is that okay with him?

The NAO report does not factor in the efficiency recommendations, but nevertheless we must acknowledge the financial pressure on our equipment programme. As has been mentioned, there are also new and emerging factors, such as cyber, space and complex weapons upgrades. We must respond to them all, which of course adds to the bill.

**Mr Kevan Jones rose—**

**Mr Ellwood:** I will give way to the hon. Gentleman for the last time.

**Mr Jones:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He says that this is fiscally neutral. He knows what the problem is now—**[ Interruption.]** What was agreed in 2015 was fiscally neutral. It was unachievable because the efficiencies were unachievable and the land sales were unachievable. That is not my opinion; that is what the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), said. If we know that, we know that in reality the only way that we can fix this is with more cash.

**Mr Ellwood:** The hon. Gentleman should refer back to Hansard to understand what I have actually said. I shall make some progress.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Ellwood:** Let me finish this part of my speech, then I shall come back to the hon. Gentleman. I am surprised by the way interventions are being made, because I am going through a series of acknowledgements of where things have gone wrong, another example of which is the challenge of flexing—the spending of future defence budgets today—which should be the exception, not the norm. CASD is a £31 billion programme and it has been necessary to bring forward some of that spending, which is why the budget has been increased by £300 million this year.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** On the equipment plan, the Minister is right to say that the £20 billion black hole is the upper end of the estimate. He talked about taking that seriously, so what will it be this time next year?

**Mr Ellwood:** We have only just completed the budget for 2017-18, and I should be clear that we have yet to embark on the annual spending round for next year. Perhaps this differs from other Departments because we have an opportunity to make a case for additional spending. We have the opportunity to make the case for a defence posture and to say what is appropriate for Britain. I cannot answer the hon. Gentleman’s point at the moment, but the purpose of this entire process is for us, hopefully with the House’s support, to make the case to the Treasury and to the Prime Minister. That is what the modernisation programme is all about.

**Dr Julian Lewis:** I fully understand the direction of my right hon. Friend’s argument and I realise that it has been a great success for him and the new Secretary of State to regain control of the process for the MOD. If, as a result of the MOD’s examinations, the minimum recommendations on what the country needs to be able to deter threats and defend itself successfully require a significant increase in the defence budget—frankly, that is the assumption that has underlain many of today’s
speeches—can we rely on the whole ministerial team to stand together as one and say to the Prime Minister, “We simply must spend more on defence”? That is what is required.

**Mr Ellwood:** My right hon. Friend hypothesises, but it is absolutely the case that we stand together to put forward a programme that will allow for the defence posture that we believe the country absolutely deserves. It is not just about asking for more money, which is obviously simple to do, and we will be lining up with other Departments doing exactly the same thing; we should also recognise that there are efficiencies to be found in the MOD itself. Indeed, as outlined in the 2015 SDSR, we are realising £7 billion of efficiency savings and moving to a more commercial footing, seeking to sell more of our world-class military equipment.

The most important reason for doing this now rather than waiting for the next SDSR in 2020 is that the world around us is changing fast. That raises important questions—arguably more so for Britain than for other countries—about exactly what role we aspire to play as a nation. The outcomes and recommendations of the defence modernisation programme will provide the evidence for how to answer the big questions. We are experiencing a chapter in which the conduct of war is changing at a furious pace. As the world gets more complex and unpredictable, ever fewer countries have the means, aspiration and, indeed, authority to help to shape it for the better.

As the Prime Minister said in her Mansion House speech last year, we are seeing resurgent nations ripping up the international rules-based order. Left unchecked, the growing threats could damage the free markets and open economies that have fuelled global growth for a generation, at the very time, post-Brexit, when we are seeking new trade deals around the globe. The task of a global Britain is clear: to defend that rules-based international order against irresponsible states; to support our partners in unstable regions by repelling the threats that they face; and to back visions for societies and economies that will prosper and help the world.

My concern, which I think is shared in all parts of the House, is that there is a tragic collective naivety about the durability of the relative peace that we enjoy today. That point has been repeated again and again in the debate. Our country, economy and values are vulnerable to a range of growing dangers, both state and non-state, that have no respect for our borders, including the rise of so-called sharp power—the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes and the manipulation of ideas, political perceptions and electoral processes. It is a model that is not new, but because of the speed and the low cost, which come thanks to the internet and so forth, it is far easier to procure.

My belief, which I hope is echoed around the Chamber, is that it has always been in our nation’s DNA to step forward when other nations might hesitate and to help to shape the world around us. However, to continue to do so will require investment, so I end by repeating my thanks to the Treasury for its support. It has to endure all Departments seeking to increase their budgets. We often say that it is only with a strong economy that we can consider any increase in any budget, but I politely add that without a strong defence, a strong economy cannot be guaranteed.

Last week, the Secretary of State spoke of 2% of GDP being spent on defence as a floor, not a ceiling. The message has to be clear: if we want to continue to play an influential role on the international stage, with full-spectrum capability; if we want to provide the critical security that post-Brexit trade deals will demand; and if we want to remain a leading contributor in the fight against extremism in the middle east and elsewhere, we cannot continue to do all that on a defence budget of just 2% of GDP. Two per cent. is just not enough. This is a question not just for the Government and parliamentarians, but for Britain: what status, role and responsibility do we aspire to have as we seek to trade more widely in a world that is becoming more dangerous?

**Sir Edward Leigh:** This has been an historic debate. For the first time in nearly 60 years, the House of Commons has discussed estimates on estimates day. I have been campaigning for this for 10 years, and the quality of this debate has vindicated the decision to discuss money on estimates day. I am so pleased that I persuaded my right hon. Friend. Friend the Chair of the Defence Committee to make the Ministry of Defence the subject of this first estimates day debate on money.

Everybody has spoken with one voice. This has not been a party-political debate in that sense. Whether from New Forest East, Gedling, Moray, Aberdeenshire, Glasgow, Aldershot or Rayleigh, everyone has made the point—and the Minister has just echoed it, one of the first times that I have heard it from the Front Bench—that spending 2% on defence is simply not enough.

In the spirit of consensus, I echo what the Opposition spokesman said—that we cannot get security on the cheap. I also echo what the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said, and I tell the Secretary of State to go back to the Treasury and No. 10 Downing Street and say that every single Member, from the SNP, the Conservatives and Labour has made this point—[Interruption.] And the Liberal Democrats. How could I forget the great speech about the contribution of the local regiments in Caithness? Members spoke with one voice. The Secretary of State can go back and say, “This is not like the 1930s. This is not like the Fulham by-election when we were worried about public opinion on disarmament. We have the support of the whole House.” He should go back, get the money and make sure that we defend our country.

**Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).**
Department for Exiting the European Union

Motion made, and Question proposed.
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Department for Exiting the European Union:

(1) the resources authorised for use for current purposes be reduced by £22,093,000 as set out in HC 808,
(2) further resources, not exceeding £650,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
(3) the sum authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £24,303,000.—[Mr Baker.]

8.31 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I extend my thanks to colleagues across the House who have backed this debate this evening. This is an important debate. The Department for Exiting the European Union is obviously a relatively new Department, but it is not an insignificant spending Department, as we have seen recently.

We have some sympathy for the Government of the day—the House will not hear me say that very often—given that they are trying to find a solution for leaving the European Union on the back of a leave campaign that told us precious little about what leaving the European Union would actually mean. There was no White Paper and no manifesto. Two years on from the EU referendum, however, the excuses are wearing a little thin. The Government increasingly seem to have not much of a clue and any analysis they conduct—at the taxpayers’ expense—is hidden from view, in spite of what this place says and others might argue.

What is clear is that the Government are taking each and every part of the United Kingdom down the road to ruin. Tomorrow we will vote on the estimates, a vote that will take place before we even know what the UK Government’s plan is for leaving the EU. The Government tell us that this is a big negotiating strategy—not to tell anybody anything. But even Baldrick could tell us that simply not having a plan, cunning or otherwise, is not much of a strategy. I fear that, just as the EU referendum was held to try and keep the Conservative party together—and we have just had a general election for the same reason—so too is every announcement on the subject. It is the Government’s raison d’être—if I may be forgiven for saying so for a moment, the issue goes beyond it. The expenditure for DExEU and the Government’s plan is for leaving the EU, and that is spending money on legal costs, including litigation, to stop this place having a say. Again, that is money taken away from frontline public services, and another way in which Brexit is costing each and every one of us. The expenditure for DExEU and the Government’s plans will be absolutely brutal. I have a message for the Government. In spite of what they might believe, there is no magic money tree. It does not exist and it has never existed. Every penny spent on leaving the EU—including the eye-watering bill of reportedly £40 billion just to leave—is cash that we will not have to spend on other services.

If I may say so for a moment, the issue goes beyond finances. This Government are so hell-bent on keeping themselves together and somehow trying to find a way a through the morass that they have created for themselves that other policy areas are being left behind. In normal times, we should be looking at the future of our NHS, and working with our European partners to tackle issues such as climate change and the ongoing conflicts that have been debated in this House that affect many of Europe’s neighbours.

As I saw just this morning, higher education is one area that will deeply affected by the UK leaving the European Union. Yes, it will be affected in terms of funding, but it will also be affected when it comes to personnel. This morning I spoke to academics who have gone on strike over their pensions at the University of St Andrews. Believe me, it is a cold time of the year to be striking; it is pretty chilly out there. Those academics want to see a Government who are committed to securing an end to this crisis. This is just one of many difficult issues, yet at a time when that area should be a priority we are having to debate these Government plans that suck cash out of our frontline services. Instead of tackling the issues that matter such as higher education funding and the strikes in that sector, we are trying to clear up a mess of the Government’s own making.

The UK Government should take the advice of almost all economic experts, businesses, and the Scottish and Welsh Governments who incidentally—unlike DExEU—have actually published their analysis. Staying in the single market and customs union would protect the economy and give the Government consistency in trade policy. While we are talking about how much money we are spending on these areas, it would remiss of me not to mention the official Opposition. It was welcome to see some movement from the Labour party after almost 20 years of glacial movement, but there is still a long way to go. When the Labour party talks about a “jobs first” Brexit, it is perhaps mindful of the Government’s analysis showing that staying in the single market is a better option, but still the least worst option.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman not feel an annoyance that the Labour party has ignored its Labour base, especially in the north-east, and that it has tried to move forward with an acceptance
of the customs union that people do not want? Does he not accept that we will get £8 billion back from the EU that we will then be able to use for everything else? Where is his argument on that?

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point, as usual, but every economic analysis that we have seen, including the one from the Scottish Government, shows the devastation that would be wrought on GDP. That means billions of pounds disappearing out of the public purse. That means billions less in Scotland and the rest of the UK. It means billions less in Northern Ireland, which is why I am not surprised that the people of Northern Ireland voted so overwhelmingly to remain part of the European Union.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Speaking as a St Andrews graduate, may I point out to the hon. Gentleman that when we leave the European Union, the University of St Andrews will no longer have to give free fees to people from the European Union, which currently results in discrimination against people from England?

Stephen Gethins: If only the good people of England would vote for a Government who believed in getting rid of tuition fees. What an argument by the hon. Gentleman! The University of St Andrews is a fine educational establishment, despite his best efforts to prove otherwise. Twenty-five per cent. of its funding comes from funding for research on issues like kids who have learning difficulties or treating dementia. It does this because it pools its resources with other European universities and with some of the finest EU nationals who have made St Andrews their home—if this Government gave them certainty, they could continue to call it their home. The hon. Gentleman’s argument is one of the weakest I have heard in this place, given the huge amounts of benefits that the University of St Andrews, like the entire education sector in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, derives from our being part of the European Union.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Apart from the financial implications, and regardless of having tuition fees or not, there is a cultural element. We could be facing damage to educational quality throughout the United Kingdom if we lose the students who bring that cultural element from other parts of the EU and provide us with the ability to learn from other cultures. When I went to university, the word “university” meant “universal”. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we are in danger of losing that?

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. I benefited personally from our membership of the European Union through being able to study at the University of Antwerp. The educational experience is the richer for having students who come from elsewhere, as well as the opportunity that students have to go elsewhere. I urge Ministers to look at this, because the cost of these programmes is not that much, especially given the benefits that they bring. Building on her point, I think we should all be ashamed of the fact that right now, as things stand, this Parliament will be one of the first that we do not leave with young people having more opportunities than at its start. That is something we should reflect on and that is quite shameful.

Going back to DExEU, the Public Accounts Committee’s recent report on exiting the EU said:

“DExEU has identified 313 areas of work, or work streams, that departments need to complete as a consequence of the UK leaving the EU...However, we are concerned that DExEU has been too slow to turn its attention to how departments will put those plans into practice and that the plans may not be sufficiently developed to enable implementation to start quickly.”

Despite the cash, the Department is being held back because of the Government’s lack of plans. I hope that the Minister will touch on that. In January, the National Audit Office released a verdict that the International Trade Department is struggling to meet deadlines, recruit enough specialist staff or retain its existing workforce as we start from scratch after losing all the trade relationships that we have built up as a part of the European Union. That means jobs, investment, and cash for Departments to spend in the future.

None of this has stopped the Chancellor giving the Department an increase of almost £30 million for preparations. And there is more: the number of times that the Chancellor will have to spend out money. The UK Government will have to spend out money as we lose the European Medicines Agency from here in London. The Government have allocated £250 million of spending for Departments to prepare for a Brexit with no deal. As I said, they have spent £1 million fighting the case to stop this place from having a say, after the Brexiteers told us how much they wanted democracy to return to the House of Commons. Is it right that this Government are blowing money on stopping Parliament from having a say? They are preventing us from analysing and publishing their own statistics, and the extra money they are having to spend will hit public services. This shows how little confidence this Government have in their own plans, and rightly so.

8.44 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Brexit is an area where it is quite hard to estimate. Brexit has been mis-served by the media. It has been played out in a soap opera of personalities, parliamentary arithmetic and party political advantage, when in fact it should be played out under the lens of trade, the economy and what it will mean. When the Prime Minister says that our best days are in front of us, that is a news story, but if vets say that there will be 325% more checks at borders because of this, that is not a news story. This is a costly step that is going to be taken, over and above anything else we might need at ports in years to come. Clearly, to even a very untrained eye, Brexit is going to be costly, and anybody who does not think that is in severe denial.

Maybe the best comment that I have heard about this was not made by Peston, Marr, Andrew Neil or any of our so-called professional media. It came from “The Mash Report”, a current affairs comedy programme, and said that Brexiteers have to tell us now what Brexit is, not what it is not, because they are very strong at telling us what Brexit is not.

At least we know one thing that Brexit will be. We have to be grateful for the efforts of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and his civil servants
for this: we know that Brexit will not be a “Mad Max” dystopia. It may be a dystopia, but it certainly will not be a “Mad Max” dystopia.

We know, because it was leaked from the UK Government and has been verified and cross-checked by the Scottish Government and the Irish Government, that staying in the customs union and single market is a 2% hit to the UK economy. That is a strong estimate of the hit. A free trade agreement is a 5% hit, and WTO rules is an 8% hit.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): Maybe the hon. Gentleman has not had the opportunity to see the report, but it is quite clear that none of these figures should be treated as forecasts or quoted in isolation. The report is full of caveats showing that many things influence those figures, and therefore they are really rough guides to compare one situation with another but should never be used as forecasts.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I have listened to the very pessimistic overview taken from the part reports. I read them today in the reading room, which was awfully secure, rather bizarrely, I thought. The reports make it clear that they are not finished estimates, but crystal-ball gazing. I take it that the hon. Gentleman has no desire to respect the people by way of referendums. He has never really got to grips with the referendum in 2014 and I am hearing tonight that he has not really got to grips with the referendum of 2017. Does his party disrespect the people and referendums?

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** The other referendum was actually in 2016, but in both referendums—of 2014 and 2016—the Scottish people voted clearly to remain in the European Union, so, yes, I do respect the two referendums. I want that opinion to be checked again in the further referendum on Scottish independence within the European Union that, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is coming down the tracks in jig time.

A customs union, as currently suggested by the principal Opposition, can have myriad or infinite permutations. Have no estimates at all been made for that? All in all, this is one of the areas where the estimates are huge, the variabilities are massive and it is very unclear where the chips will fall.

The overall message that should be going out is that when boardrooms and when the people of Scotland look at the two parties in this Chamber—the Government and the principal Opposition—they have to start thinking and, particularly in the boardrooms, they have to start speaking. They do not have to enter into political debate, but they have to start to become very strident indeed in what they are saying. I meet too many of those from companies who come to me with their fears and their estimates of what might happen. In reality, they have to start saying what they want, because otherwise it will be too late.

I am reminded of the book, “On the Psychology of Military Incompetence”. In a number of military events that occurred, whether in Crimea—the charge of the Light Brigade was in Crimea of course—with the Boers in South Africa, in Mesopotamia or in Afghanistan, the common theme running through them all was the fact that the rank and file could not believe their commanders could get it so utterly wrong, and it was only when hot lead ripped through bare flesh that people then understood. There are companies that are too afraid to move and that, for one reason or another, will not say a word, but when and football fans, they will know that readers can pick and choose players from a variety of teams and compose their own team based on that fantasy—perhaps called Team Corbyn; I do not know—but it is notable that this need not bear any relation to the reality of football other than the statistics, and even the players do not need to know that they are in somebody’s fantasy football team. Similarly, what is now emerging is a fantasy customs union—it bears no relation to the views of the 27 other partner countries—and they can pick and choose elements from the newspapers to their heart’s content.

The estimates in the leaked statistics show that this option—it is not the customs union or the single market—will lead to a hit of between 2% and 5% to 6% to the UK economy. The current Labour leadership should be very clear about that.
they are taken down by the 2%, 5% or the 8% damage of Brexit, I tell those companies now that it will be too late to do anything about it then, so speak now.

Recently, my Committee went to the USA and Canada to look at the possibility of trade deals. The farmers lobby asked us why. Ford said a UK-US deal would be incremental, but that a UK-EU one would be existential. Certainly, when I saw the border with other Committee members, it was not as fast as the border at the moment between Ireland and Northern Ireland or as the border between France and Spain. These are some of the realities that are coming our way.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeoval) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am very glad to give way to one of the Select Committees colleagues who were with me. I predicted at the border that some people would see what they wanted to see, so let us see what happens.

Mr Fysh: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we saw the border between the US and Canada. The US and Canada have different regulatory and customs systems, yet they have a just-in-time, integrated supply chain that works perfectly well, so it is possible. The forecasts he referred to earlier take no account of the possibility of such just-in-time supply chains continuing to work in a free trade agreement scenario.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: We were told that the average wait time was 15 minutes and just-in-time takes cognisance of that. If two minutes at Dover becomes four minutes, that will result in a 17-mile tailback. And, of course, no embarkation of ships takes place on the US-Canadian border after they have passed, or just before, the border point.

In summary, this Government exercise is costing about £250 million a year. It will cost the Scottish economy, which concerns me most, between £3.6 billion and £12 billion a year by 2030, and the way in which the two main parties are going at it means that the figure will probably be closer to £12 billion than to £3.6 billion. It really is time that the UK took a short, sharp look at the reality, which is that the people want their jobs and they want the economy running, not the ideological purity of some Members of this House.

8.56 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): May I begin by saying that I welcome the fact that the House now has the opportunity to debate estimates? Like many Members who previously served in local government, I was astonished when I first arrived that the House of Commons appeared to spend no time at all discussing the Government’s expenditure, when many of us would have sat through many hours of committee meetings poring line by line over the expenditure plans of the local authorities of which we were members. I doubt that this debate—this is already evident—will feature the kind of consensus we saw in the last debate on the need for more expenditure. I have to confess that this is one area of Government spending where, to be frank, I wish we were not spending anything at all, but we are where we are following the referendum result.

I will, however, just pick up on one point made by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), whom I congratulate on having secured this debate. Perhaps if the Government had not wasted so much time repeating the mantra, “No deal is better than a bad deal,” we would not be spending so much money on preparing for no deal, which would be clearly disastrous for the British economy and, frankly, I say to the Minister, would never get through this House of Commons. That is a consequence of choices that the Government have made.

It is fair to say, and not to be argued with, that relatively little preparation had been made in government for a leave result in the referendum, but clearly the establishment of DExEU was a logical and necessary consequence. I have to say, however, that the civil servants and, indeed, the Ministers who work in the Department face a really substantial and highly complex task, because for 45 years our trade, laws, relationships, rules and standards have been inextricably intertwined with those of our European friends and neighbours. The task we now face is the process of pulling out the plug of that relationship while trying to fashion a new plug in the course of negotiation, and everyone is wondering, when we stick it in the socket and press the switch, what will still work and what will not. The honest answer is that, as things stand, we just do not know.

The Department, of course, has been established from scratch and has recruited very able people from all across Whitehall. Lots of civil servants wanted to work in DExEU because of the nature of the challenge, which is a once in a generation—probably a once in a civil service career—opportunity. The Department has been set the task of both understanding the implications of Brexit and of advising Ministers on the choices that might be made in how to handle it.

On the first of those tasks, drawing on my experience as Chair of the Select Committee, I know that, in truth, the more we look, the more we encounter questions that currently have no answer. On the second, it was clearly sensible of DExEU to, in effect, subcontract to other Government Departments the task of talking at the start of the process to stakeholders about the important issues of Brexit raises, but I have to say that, when it comes to development of policy, I have a great deal of sympathy with civil servants. Unusually, they are not suffering from a lack of money; they are suffering from a lack of clarity from the people who head the Department, Ministers, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet about what the UK Government want.

In my experience, if you give direction to the civil service, it will get on and do the task using all the expertise, energy and ability for which it is highly regarded in this country and around the world. However, all those qualities cannot make up for a lack of leadership, let us be frank, caused by the divisions—open secret—in the Cabinet on what the right thing to do is. It is not surprising that the Prime Minister sought to move Olly Robbins, who was the permanent secretary in the Department for Exiting the European Union, across to the Cabinet Office to work directly to her rather than remain in his role as permanent secretary.
[Hilary Benn]

Looking at the scrutiny that has taken place thus far of DExEU—reference has been made in part to some of it—the National Audit Office said in July last year that the Government had failed to take a unified approach to talks with the EU. The Comptroller and Auditor General commented, in a rather unusually colourful way, that the Minister had left hopes of a successful Brexit at risk of falling apart “like a chocolate orange”. I suspect that when the history of Brexit comes to be written there will be a special footnote for chocolate oranges, “Mad Max” and this week’s favourite phrase, snake oil. Frankly, they could remain in the dustbin of those footnotes as far as I am concerned.

In November, the NAO reported on DExEU and the Government’s preparations for Brexit. It said, as we heard from the hon. Member for North East Fife who opened the debate, that 310 work streams had been identified. Some mid-sized Departments, in particular the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs but also the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, have a lot of issues they need to grapple with. Not surprisingly, there is a lot of work to be done. They have to formulate policy, draft legislation, consult with the devolved Administrations and, in some cases, new systems and processes have to be invented. One task facing the Home Office is how to document 3 million European citizens when, because of the system of free movement we have operated, we do not know who some of them are. The Treasury always starts by saying to Departments that they will have to do all that within their existing budgets, but we know that last summer and autumn it had to review and agree bids for additional funding for 2017-18.

There is a very complex structure across Whitehall for dealing with Brexit, but the Public Accounts Committee suggested:

“No one in the civil service is clearly responsible for making sure that arrangements overall are fit-for-purpose for Brexit.”

In its report of 7 February, the PAC concluded that “Government Departments have got to face up to some very hard choices” and that “the Department for Exiting the European Union (DExEU) and the Cabinet Office do not have a robust enough plan to identify and recruit the people and skills needed quickly.”

I note the high turnover in staff in DExEU. It said there was a need for “much greater transparency from DExEU, HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office on formally setting out who is responsible for what and on the progress that is being made.”

It said that accountability was unclear and that “risked undermining speedy decision-making”. I will come back to that point. It also said that there was a “paucity of information in the public domain”.

On that last point, it is frankly extraordinary that so many decisions have been made about the kind of Brexit the Government wish to pursue in the absence of any estimate, any evidence or any analysis whatever. When the Secretary of State admitted to me, in testimony to the Select Committee, that when the Cabinet decided to leave the customs union it had done so without having before it any assessment whatever of the economic impact, that said it all. Having given Parliament the impression that detailed impact analysis was being done on different sectors of the economy, we were—I think the whole House was—astonished to discover that this was not the case. It was not a lack of money in the estimates that caused that; it was a lack of policy and an apparent lack of interest.

We have before us the exit analysis, which the latest Humble Address instructed the Government to pass over to the Select Committee and which has been shared in confidence with all Members of this House and the other place. We have had the chance to see it, and the public have had a chance to read part of what it says, courtesy of BuzzFeed and the Financial Times. We know that for the first time it has attempted to look at some costs of the different choices when it comes to our future economic relationship with the European Union, although Ministers have said from the Dispatch Box—indeed, they were at pains to point it out when we debated the Humble Address—that it does not include the Government’s preferred option. I presume the reason is that those who were doing the modelling did not know what the Government’s preferred option was at the time they undertook that work.

The Brexit Committee has decided that it is minded to publish the Government’s EU exit analysis, but it has asked the Secretary of State whether he would wish any specific details to be redacted on the basis that they would either be sensitive to the negotiations, market sensitive or commercially confidential. As a Committee, we have always argued in favour of as much transparency as possible in the process, without damaging our negotiating position. If we are going to be able to do that, we need as much information as possible.

If the press reports of what the exit analysis has to say are correct, it is clear that the economy will be less big and less strong than it would otherwise have been, because of Brexit. Incidentally, that assessment is shared by many other organisations that have done their own economic impact assessment.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I will, to my fellow Select Committee member.

Peter Grant: It is now in the public domain. I think for the first time, that the Committee intends to publish as much of these documents as possible. Does the right hon. Gentleman see the contradiction in the two claims that have been made by those who oppose publication? On the one hand, the documents contain information that would be very useful to our negotiating partners or opponents in the Brexit negotiations, but on the other, they are so unreliable that they are no good to anybody. Does he accept that there is a blatant contradiction that the Government have to address?

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman anticipates exactly the point that I was going to make. I should point out that the information about the Committee taking that decision last week came into the public domain when our minutes went up on our website, so it is available for everybody to see.

I was just about to say that the assessments of the economic impact of some policy choices that the Government face have been hotly contested by some
Civil servants have been accused of producing figures to support views that they already hold, rather than undertaking an objective examination of the evidence. I have to say that, to get that wrong—[Interruption]—and Government economists in this way is both wrong and unfair. The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who is also a member of the Select Committee, was absolutely right to make the point that the analysis is, rightly, heavily caveated. That is important, because trying to forecast what the future holds is a difficult business, as we all know, and there is a strong argument for saying that if the information is going to be in the public domain, the nature of the caveats should be too.

Mr Fysh: Does the right hon. Gentleman think that there is enough information in the impact analyses to judge whether the impact assessments are objective?

Hilary Benn: I made the point a moment ago that Government economists and the Treasury are not the only people who are trying to look at the economic impact of leaving the European Union and what the alternative models might produce. I presume that all the other ones have already been published; they all show the same picture. Indeed, the best indication we have had since the referendum result of what the world thought of the British economy’s future value came the day after, when the pound fell. The world looked at the United Kingdom and said, “You’re not going to be as well off as you were. The economy is still going to grow—but it will grow less than it would have done had you not left.”

All I am arguing is that we should make the effort to try to understand. Having been a Cabinet Minister and having looked at many impact assessments when legislation was coming forward, I know that we do this for all sorts of things that are really quite minor by comparison with this absolutely fundamental change that the country is facing. That is why, for me, it is inexplicable that so little work has been undertaken by the Government in an attempt to assess the situation so people can then look at it. The other point I would make is that if that assessment had shown that the British economy would be better off, the report would not only have been published yonks ago, but would already be gathering dust on our bookshelves.

Mr Fysh: I have looked at forecasts for many years as a professional. I share the right hon. Gentleman’s concerns about these impact forecasts, but perhaps for different reasons. They have absolutely no value as a decision-making tool. Frankly, I am shocked at how poor and poorly constructed they are. I encourage all hon. Members to read them in detail and see exactly that.

Hilary Benn: Different Members will draw different conclusions from what they read. It sounds to me that the hon. Gentleman is making an argument in favour of openness, so that everybody can make a judgment. In the circumstances, that would be a very wise thing to do.

My last point is that the argument we are currently having in the political world about membership of the customs union as opposed to leaving it, which is the Government’s policy, is all about what is in the best economic interests of the United Kingdom, our businesses, and the jobs and communities that depend on them. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), who occupies a position as shadow Brexit Minister, that I unreservedly welcome the fact that there is now a growing consensus in the House in favour of remaining in a customs union with the European Union after the transition period. As hon. Members will know, I have been arguing for that for a very long time. It is supported by, among others, the CBI; it would remove any risks of a return to tariffs and help to ease concerns about supply chains; it would be an essential first step, but not the complete answer, to ensuring a free and open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic without infrastructure; and it would also save money—the hon. Member for North East Fife made the point that, if we are in a customs union, we will not need to recruit a load of new customs officers.

The House will face that choice in due course, however long the Government delay the Trade Bill. To the two SNP Members who have spoken, I should say that, despite their slightly ungenerous characterisation of the policy position announced by the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Brexit Secretary over the last two days, I trust that, when the vote comes, the SNP will be in the Division Lobby with Labour Members and others.

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

Hilary Benn: I am looking forward to confirmation of that now.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The confirmation I would need is this: what is the difference between “a customs union” and “the customs union”? I said that there are many other possibilities—an infinite number—but I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows exactly what it means.

Hilary Benn: I hope that that is not a caveated expression of support. My interpretation of “a customs union”, as opposed to “the customs union”, is that it would bring all the same benefits—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: They are the same thing.

Hilary Benn: Indeed. There is a legal argument about whether one can remain a member of the customs union if we are not a member of the European Union. But SNP Members need to be careful: if we go through the Division Lobby and discover that they are sitting on their hands when we have the chance to say to the Government with one voice—we should not weaken—that the view of those who think that staying in a customs union is right—

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

Stephen Gethins rose—

Hilary Benn: I will give way to the hon. Member for North East Fife.

Stephen Gethins: As usual, the right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point and is making an excellent speech. I agree with much of what he has said and look forward to defeating the Government in due course. However, one challenge we have is this: The Government are on the ropes; will he gently nudge Labour Front Benchers to get behind the single market as well as the customs union?
Hilary Benn: I take that as an endorsement of the development of our policy announced by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Brexit Secretary over the past two days. I notice the slightly different approaches of the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). I want us to continue to develop our policy. I have always said openly that the single market issue is more complicated because of free movement, but where we can find common ground with some Conservative Members, we need to maximise that unity of purpose and strength. In the end, if the Government are forced to realise that they cannot get policies through the House of Commons, they will have to change their mind. As I said in my last speech in the House, if the Government will not do their job, the House will have to do it for them.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: Other Members want to speak. I have given way already, and I am about to bring my remarks to a close.

It seems to me that the estimates we should really be discussing are our best estimates of the economic impact of Brexit. We are now running out of time. It is 19 months since the referendum, and there are nine months to go in the negotiation, but, crucially, there is one month until the European Union draws up its negotiating guidelines for the new economic relationship. If we do not get a move on, we run the risk that options that the House—or, heaven knows, the Government, if they change their view—might want to pursue are closed off by the EU in the negotiating guidelines for want of clarity about what the United Kingdom is seeking.

Bill Grant: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I will, but then I must end my speech.

Bill Grant: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. I am standing up without holding on to the ropes at the moment.

I am thoroughly enjoying the right hon. Gentleman’s balanced and informative speech, but should he not consider the possible thoughts of, for example, the Dutch flower growers, the Italian Prosecco producers, the Italian winemakers and the German car manufacturers? I am sure he agrees that they will wish to do business with the United Kingdom, because we are a good country to do business with.

Hilary Benn: The Prosecco and BMW car analysis of our future economic relationship with the European Union—we heard a lot of it during the referendum—simply fails to understand the sheer complexity of the task that we now face. The customs union, in one sense, is the easy bit. When it comes to trading goods and services, we now face. The customs union, in one sense, is the easy bit. When it comes to our future relationship with the European Union, that is a complex task and the need to continue to negotiate and, in effect, renegotiate with Switzerland how the relationship will work. The second issue that the EU raises is this: it is afraid that we will use freedom to gain the competitive advantage of being able to sail through the door that the Government are asking it to leave open for us when it comes to trading goods and services.

We are now learning that after the simplistic promises—“You can have your cake and eat it”, “There will be a deep and special partnership”, and all that sort of stuff—we have come to the end of that approach to Brexit. Now is the time for choices. The Government will make their choice, and we will have to live with the consequences, but it will be very apparent to Ministers—not least, I am sure, from the exchange of views around that room in Chequers—that there are trade-offs to be made, depending on what it is that we want.

I have argued passionately for remaining in a customs union not only because I think that it is in the best interests of British business, but because of the question of Northern Ireland. Believe you me, if we are to meet the very high bar that the Government have rightly set for maintaining an open border—the Select Committee made this point in its report at the end of last year—I do not see how that can be reconciled with the Government’s current policy of leaving the customs union and the single market. What we need now are clarity and certainty, and we need them with speed. Above all, however, we need the right policies for the economic future of the United Kingdom.

9.19 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). I hope to respond in a minute to some of the points that he made about the customs union. However, before I start to talk about DExEU and Brexit, I want to make some general observations about the process in which we are engaged during our two days of debate on the estimates.

When I, and most of my colleagues, came to the House in 2015, we were quite shocked by the lack of financial scrutiny of the Executive in the Chamber. Since we became the third party, we have pressed for change in the way in which the estimates are considered. I therefore welcome the baby steps taken this year, in that we are at least able to focus on a set of figures that relate to a Government Department and what it is doing, rather than discuss random topics that may or may not be related to budgetary matters. However, we still have a long way to go in holding the Executive to account financially and in terms of their policies.

I firmly believe that if we were the board of a large charitable organisation, the charity regulators would find us wanting in terms of our procedures for financial scrutiny and accountability. I also believe that if we were the board of a large corporation, our shareholders would be demanding action to improve our processes. I therefore hope that the steps we have taken this year are the beginning of a process, and we might one day get to a situation where the Government are required to produce a programme plan charting their future policies and
their effects, and then each Department has to produce a programme plan, which each Select Committee can scrutinise along with the budget that goes with it. That is the process that the Scottish Government are engaged in, in terms of how they govern the responsibilities under their remit, and it is one that we could learn from and try to develop here in the years ahead.

What happens when we combine a rudimentary process of programme planning and financial planning with the complete absence of a set of policy objectives in the first place? The answer isDEXEU, because here we have combined an absolute lack of planning and a financial mess. DEXEU was set up in the summer of 2016 by a shell-shocked Government who frankly did not know what to do in implementing a referendum result that they did not expect. In a desperate desire to be seen to be doing something, they set up a brand, spanning new Department, with lots of new letterheads and people to write memos to each other, and lots of people employed to research and analyse something, the only problem being that there was no plan to be implemented.

In the absence of a plan to be implemented, we have gone from one chaos to another, and I share the Minister's embarrassment. This must be the only Department in history that underspends its budget not by a couple of percentage points, but by 50% in its first year, and it has had to go to the Treasury to scale down its estimates of spending in the next financial year.

That is a phenomenal metaphor for the Government's Brexit policy, because they do not know quite what they are doing. In the absence of their being able to play a co-ordination role in planning for Brexit, individual Departments have had to be allowed to do their own thing and try to deal with the consequences as best they can. That is why 90% of the amount of money being spent on Brexit preparations, or the lack of them, is not to be found in the Department supposedly responsible for co-ordinating preparations for Brexit. That is a ridiculous situation.

This, of course, is from a Government who have said not only that they will set up a brand new Department, but that money is no object for that Department. This is a Government who cannot find the money for our health service; a Government who are determined to squeeze down wages by pay restraint in the public sector and reduced living standards; a Government who cannot find the money for our Department for Exiting the European Union. That is a phenomenal metaphor for the Government's shell-shocked Government who frankly did not know what to ha ve with the EU27, yet the Department for International

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It is becoming a bit of a habit that there are exchanges across the House with Members saying "You" and "you" and "you". We must observe the courtesies of the House; one goes through the Chair.

Tommy Sheppard: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was going to point out that the hon. Gentleman's intervention had a tenuous link to the subject of debate and no connection whatever to what I was saying, but he has none the less made his point for the record.

What does this lack of preparation mean for financial planning? I shall give the House two quick examples. The first is the customs union—or the customs arrangements, as the Government will call them. I might be wrong, but it seems overwhelmingly logical for our global trade that if we are leaving the European Union, we should first immediately try to seek an arrangement with those countries that are nearest to us and with which we have the greatest trading links. That ought not to be a matter of controversy. The only reason that it is controversial is the existence of an unreasonable number of people on the Government Benches who are so Europhobic that they will not countenance anything that looks like a cut-down relationship with the European Union. The idea of having a customs union should not be controversial, however, and I very much welcome the fact that Her Majesty's Opposition now seem to be on a course towards coming round to that point of view.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: At one stage, the Labour party was against “the customs union”. Now it is for “a customs union”. The Conservatives are clearly against the customs union, and the Opposition are rallying around it, but we now have a third option from Labour, apparently dividing the Opposition, in favour of a customs union that it cannot fully explain. Does my hon. Friend see a difficulty in what Labour is proposing?

Tommy Sheppard: I am going to be uncharacteristically kind to the Labour party and take the right hon. Member for Leeds Central at his word. He seemed to be suggesting that we were moving towards a situation in which the difference between “a customs union” and “the customs union” might not be that great. In fact, I think he said that he viewed “a customs union” as having to replicate the procedures of “the customs union”.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): This is becoming one of the most pointless, tedious and repetitive conversations. May I help the hon. Gentleman out? There is not really any difference; it is all about how it is embedded in the treaty. We cannot be part of “the customs union” because it is part of the treaty that we are leaving, so we will need a new one. Therefore it will be “a customs union”. There is, in essence, no difference.

Tommy Sheppard: Well, if there is no difference, welcome to the party! It is good to have the hon. Lady on board, and we look forward to her walking through the Lobby with us next time this comes to a decision.

The debate about customs arrangements is relevant to the budget because the clock is ticking and we are now only just over a year away from Brexit day. We still do not know what customs arrangements we are going to have with the EU27, yet the Department for International
Trade is allowed to run round the world meeting everyone and talking about all manner of global trading arrangements, even though everyone knows that if there is a set of legacy arrangements involving the European Union that will probably place conditions on or compromise any arrangements we can make with anyone else. What a waste of money it is to engage in the process of pretending that we are going to have unfettered global trading arrangements with the rest of the world while at the same time discussing the need for preferential trading arrangements with the European Union.

Let me just take one more minute to talk about the second aspect of Brexit and DExEU that illustrates the lack of co-ordination and the financial waste involved in this process—namely, clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Unless that clause is corrected, it will drive a coach and horses through the principle of devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, yet at the 11th hour we still do not have the amendments that the Government admitted in debates in this Chamber were necessary to make the Bill work.

The question is this: who is at fault for that? Is it the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Prime Minister? Someone needs to tell us why they could not achieve the simple thing of making the Bill work.

Mr Fysh: One of the concerns I have is that we might have a political agreement on a transition or implementation period in the next six or nine months, but if that falls over at the last minute, it will be essential that we have the preparations now. I am concerned that we are not getting on with appropriate speed with some of the infrastructure that could alleviate the potential trade issues at the border.

Sammy Wilson: Not only are these preparations needed in case there is no deal; many of these preparations will be essential whether or not there is a deal. Of course we have to spend money on registering EU citizens who already live in the United Kingdom, as the Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), mentioned. The Home Office needs to spend money on the borders as it prepares for our exit. Whether we have a deal or no deal—or whatever scenario there is—it is essential that we have made the preparations now. I am concerned that we are not getting on with appropriate speed with some of the infrastructure that could alleviate the potential trade issues at the border.

Reference has been made to an underspend. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) said that the underspend is a metaphor for Brexit, and maybe it is. Yes, we will save an awful lot of money when we leave the European Union. We will save our contributions to the EU budget. If the underspend is a metaphor for Brexit, it is simply due to efficiency. That is well and good.

The Department is entering uncharted waters. Given the work streams that need to be done, do the underspend last year and the reduction this year reflect the true resources that the Department needs? Given the nature of the people, as was explained to us at the start of the debate, have there been difficulties in getting the needed expertise? If so, what plans does the Department have to ensure that we have sufficient resources to do the
important work we have talked about? The Minister has made an assessment of future needs; is he convinced that other Departments have sufficient money? Finally, £365,000 has been spent on legal fees in Northern Ireland. Have those costs arisen as a result of action taken by the known fraudster in Northern Ireland who is now a serial litigant?

9.37 pm

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to sum up this debate. Given that we are short on time, I will keep my remarks brief.

There has been interest in this debate from everyone but Tory Back Benchers—it is noticeable that none of them wanted to speak—so I hope we might have even more time next time around. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) said that this is the first time we have had anything like a proper chance to examine Government estimates. Who knows? Maybe by the time this Parliament is 321 years old we will have financial scrutiny procedures as inclusive and as thorough as those that the Scottish Parliament put in place before it was one year old, assuming this Parliament ever gets to 321 years old—I would not bet on it.

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Peter Grant**: I cannot take interventions from Members who chose not to put in to speak. There is limited time for the three Front-Bench speeches, and I want to give the Minister time to answer the questions that have been asked.

When it comes to Brexit, DExEU is practically the only Department that has not seen its budget increased during the year. The Home Office needs more money to cope with an immigration system that will do who knows what because we do not know what immigration will look like. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs needs money for a customs system to deal with who knows what customs arrangements we have after Brexit.

It was interesting that we heard from the Labour Front Bench that being in a customs union with the customs union is no different from being in the customs union except that it is not enshrined in the treaties. Given that that distinction first appeared in the Tory party’s White Paper shortly after the Brexit referendum, I hope the Minister will be able to confirm tonight whether that is the Government’s understanding: being in a customs union with the customs union is not any different in practice from being in the customs union.

Good news it is, partly because it simplifies things and partly because it saves Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs about £400 million of unnecessary expenditure.

Interestingly, despite all the other expenditure we have seen in relation to Brexit, a proper analysis has not yet been done as to the likely impacts of all the different scenarios we could be faced with. We keep getting told that the few pages that have been done are so full of caveats that they are not particularly worth while. What does that say about a Government who committed themselves to a hard Brexit—to leaving the customs union and the single market—without a single proper analysis about what the economic impact would be?

That is especially the case as we see now that the economic impact is a 5%, 10% or 15% fall in economic growth over the next few years, with billions of pounds wiped out of the economy. The Government have committed themselves to that without even stopping to think about the impact. If that is not complacency and incompetence to an almost criminal degree, I genuinely do not know what is.

The most optimistic noise that the Brexit Secretary has been able to make recently has been to tell us that leaving the European Union will not be quite as bad as “Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome”. Previously, the Foreign Secretary predicted that it would be as successful as “Titanic”. That has prompted a bit of a Twitter storm, with people trying to suggest what disaster movies would best describe the process of leaving the European Union. My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) tried to broaden the description by talking about soap operas. I do not know whether it should be “That’s when good neighbours stop being good friends” or perhaps “Home and Away”, because the Prime Minister tells one story when she is at home here and a very different story when she is away in Brussels trying to woo the European Union.

Rather than talking about a blockbuster disaster movie, it may surprise Members if I say that the Government are actually heading for a real blockbuster of a Brexit. On 1 January 1973, the UK officially joined the Common Market, as it was then known. Wee Jimmy Osmond was at the top of the charts, but a few weeks later he was displaced by those immortal glam rockers “The Sweet”. Those of us lucky enough to be growing up in those times, which were an epitome of a combination of the best possible taste in music, fashion and television, will never forget the lyrics of that immortal song, the only No. 1 they ever had. Its chorus reads like a press statement coming out at the end of a Brexit Cabinet meeting:

“Does anyone know the way?

There’s got to be a way...

We just haven’t got a clue what to do.”

Or, as a constituent more pithily said to me a few days ago about Brexit:

“They couldn’t make a bigger bahookie of it if they tried”.

I should explain that that guid Scots word does not mean “elbow”, although given the Government’s performance to date I am not sure they would know the difference.

The only question to be asked on the Brexit estimates today is: if this is how much we have to take away— hundreds of millions of pounds—from our health service, from desperately needed investment in social housing, from our welfare system and from our understaffed and under-equipped armed forces, and spend to create a machinery for a failed Brexit, can we imagine how much we would have to spend to make it work? No Government could make it work, and this Government certainly cannot. They have to change. They have got to get back around the negotiating table and get us away from a cliff edge of a hard Brexit. Otherwise, the amounts of money that have been included in the expenditure estimates for the Brexit Department will be a drop in the ocean compared with the overall cost to the people of these islands.

**Douglas Ross**: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) mentioned at the opening of his remarks that there had been no
Conservative Back-Bench speakers and he criticised Conservative Members for that. May I ask, through you, whether he would agree that that would therefore be a criticism of the Scottish National party, which in a four-hour defence debate immediately preceding this could one not muster one Back-Bench speaker?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has found his own salvation. He has made his own point in his own way, with his usual force and acclarity. It is on the record.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Today, Parliament is asked to consider an underspend by the Department for Exiting the European Union. We might as well, as it is far from clear what we have been getting for our money anyway. The Government wasted £1.4 million on fighting Parliament’s right to vote on the decision to trigger article 50. Around 75% of the cost derived from the Supreme Court appeal that Labour opposed at the time as a waste of money.

It gets worse. The Government decided that, for show, it would look good if Sir Tim Barrow could be photographed hand-delivering the article 50 letter from the Prime Minister to the European Council. The two-business-premier class return tickets cost around £1,000. Apparently, it took two people to deliver the letter, which is surprising given how understaffed the Department is.

Will the Minister comment on the Department’s unusually large staff churn? The National Audit Office recently found that churn at the Department is running at 9% per quarter. The civil service average is 9% per year. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said in his, as ever, excellent speech, the Institute for Government thinks that that degree of churn in the Department at the forefront of co-ordinating the complicated task of leaving the EU should cause concern both within and outside the Department. It certainly causes me concerns.

Perhaps the Department is not so much at the centre of co-ordinating this complicated task after all. In December 2017, Oliver Robbins left his role as permanent secretary at the Department to focus on his role as the Prime Minister’s European adviser. Robbins was joined at the Cabinet Office by his own team and a unit of around 30 staff. An answer to a Labour written question revealed that Robbins’ new unit includes five deputy secretaries, on up to £38,500 each. Band As, on up to £60,500 each; seven Cabinet directors, on up to £118,000 each; six Cabinet Office directors, on up to £100,000 each; and 10 deputy directors, on up to £90,000 each.

In December, we found out that one in four DEEU posts was unfilled, including 81 policy roles, and that 44% of DEEU staff plan to leave within the next year. Jill Rutter, programme director at the Institute for Government, put it like this:

“T’ve been losing people at a higher rate than any civil service department. It obviously makes your task harder of filling up that bucket, it’s like filling up a bucket with a bit of a leak.”

Can the Minister explain how much of the Department’s underspend is because of an inability to recruit and retain staff? Why is it that the Department struggles to find and keep hold of good staff? What is it about the Department that is so off-putting to talented civil servants?

Perhaps it is because there is a Whitehall turf war over Brexit, leaving the Department effectively neutered and paralysed by the division in government.

With such excess resources available, how is it that the Department made such a pathetic job of pretending that it had conducted sectoral analyses of Brexit’s impact on the economy? When they were finally made available, they were an embarrassing copy-and-paste waste of paper. I will not go over the whole shoddy tale again, but it proved just how disorganised and under-powered the Government’s Brexit operation is. It is chaotic.

The worst part of all of this is that amid the chaos, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has turned his face away from one of the most important issues that his Government faces: the impact of Brexit on the border in Northern Ireland. I have visited Northern Ireland on three occasions in the past three months, because the impact of the reintroduction of a hard border would be a catastrophe for all communities in Northern Ireland. I agree with the Government’s assertion that Northern Ireland should be treated the same as the rest of the UK, but Labour will never support a Brexit deal that results in any customs infrastructure whatsoever on the Northern Ireland border.

The Secretary of State has not visited Northern Ireland once since September 2016, and I do not think he has ever visited the border. That is neglectful. He ought to go there so that he can correct the Tory former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), when he says that the Good Friday agreement has outlived its use. Such outrageous, casual ignorance is frightening.

Will the Minister assure the House that there is no circumstance in which the Government would countenance establishing any infrastructure on the Northern Ireland border?

Can the Minister identify for the House a single example of an open border between two countries operating different customs regimes? Anywhere—Norway and Sweden, or the USA and Canada? It cannot be done. Therefore, because there are no credible alternatives that would safeguard the Good Friday agreement, and because of the need to support manufacturers throughout the UK, the Labour party has said that it would seek to negotiate a new customs union with the EU.

The Government are failing in so many of their responsibilities, and the excuse that is so often given is that they are focused on Brexit. Maybe if Brexit was going well, if the Department was not so unstable, if there was clarity of position or a sense of energy and purpose, or if the Prime Minister could articulate with any certainty where the country is heading, Ministers might be forgiven for their lack of progress on so many issues. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) and the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) spoke of metaphors, but sadly an apt metaphor for the entire Government can be found in the Department’s rapid decline into chaos, division, irrelevance and incompetence.

Mr Speaker: We are joined this evening by the Prime Minister of Kosovo, who is supported by the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers). We are most grateful to the Prime Minister for his attendance at the House of Commons and we wish him and his country all the best.
9.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) on opening the debate and I thank the hon. Members who have contributed. I am proud to serve in and represent the Department for Exiting the European Union, which—despite having been established for only two years—has achieved a great deal.

As the House knows, the Department was set up in response to the referendum, one of the biggest democratic exercises in British history. Turnout was high at 72%, with more than 33 million people having their say. Turnout was higher than in any general election since 1992, and it was the second highest popular vote of any form in our long and distinguished political history. More than 1 million more people voted leave than voted remain.

The Department was established at pace from a standing start. It has grown considerably to more than 600 staff today, plus more than 150 people based in Brussels at our permanent representation to the EU. DExEU staff are drawn from more than 40 Departments and public bodies, and 180 staff have joined us from outside government to ensure that we have the range of expertise to deliver our objectives. If time allows, I will respond specifically to the Chair of the Select Committee, but I join him in paying tribute to the quality of our staff, and I was glad to hear him do so. I am extremely proud to work with them.

As many hon. Members observed in the debate, and as many others have done here and in the Lords, the scale of the Department’s task is immense, but its objectives are clear. One of DExEU’s primary objectives is to lead and co-ordinate cross-Government work to seize the opportunities of Brexit and to ensure a smooth process as we leave, including the required domestic legislation, on the best possible terms.

Delivering EU exit is, of course, a cross-Government effort. Our work in DExEU means that we come together with the devolved Administrations, Parliament, EU member states and institutions, and a wide range of other interested parties. The Department is small and agile in Whitehall terms, with just over 600 people. We are focused on co-ordinating activities towards our EU exit in Brussels, in Whitehall and beyond across the UK.

For 2017-18, our original budget for the year was £106.1 million. Following a supplementary estimate, we have reduced this budget to £80.6 million. The Department transferred £1 million to the Cabinet Office in relation to supporting the transfer of the role of the Europe adviser to the Cabinet Office, and a further £0.8 million to other Departments to support activities directly related to our exit from the European Union. A further £20 million of the original budget was returned to the Treasury to be transferred to and used by other Departments for critical work relating to Brexit. Our Department has sufficient funding in current and future years to deliver its objectives.

We have achieved a tremendous amount already. We have put in place a major legislative programme to make sure our statute book continues to function smoothly as we exit the European Union, and to cater for the full range of negotiated and non-negotiated outcomes.

DExEU has set out the Government’s future vision in 14 position papers, supporting the keynote speeches delivered by the Prime Minister at Lancaster House and in Florence. Officials from my Department have engaged in negotiations and supported the Secretary of State in the Brussels negotiations, which ran from June to December. That culminated in our publication, with the EU, of a joint report on 8 December last year, setting out the significant agreements that we had reached on the three key areas of citizens’ rights, the budget and Northern Ireland.

A fair deal on citizens’ rights is one that will allow for the UK and EU citizens to get on with their lives broadly as they do now across the country where they live. The financial settlement honours the commitments that we undertook as members of the EU, as we said it would. It is a fair delivery of our obligations in the light of the spirit of our future partnership and it is one based on reasonable assumptions. The settlement is estimated to stand at between £35 billion and £39 billion in current terms, which is the equivalent of around four years of our current budget contribution, around two of which we expect to be covered by the implementation period. It is far removed from the figure that some had suggested of £60 billion.

We have an agreement in relation to Northern Ireland that commits us to maintain the common travel area with Ireland, to uphold the Belfast agreement in full and to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland while upholding the constitutional and economic integrity of the whole United Kingdom. On that point, the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) asked about visits to Northern Ireland. I checked just moments before I rose to speak. The answer is that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who is responsible for engaging with Northern Ireland, has made three visits and has another planned.

We want to honour the agreements set out in the joint report. The important thing now is for talks to move forward so that we can agree the terms of our future relationship with the EU in order to provide vital certainty to businesses and citizens. The right hon. Member for East Antrim ( Sammy Wilson) asked what signals we wanted to send. Although I agree with him that a responsible Government should prepare for all scenarios, the signal that this Government wish to send is that which I have just set out: we wish to fulfil the withdrawal agreement; we wish to agree an implementation period; we wish to agree a co-operation on security and defence because our commitment to peace and security in Europe is unconditional; and, of course, we want to move forward to agree a future economic partnership that is in all our mutual interests.

Negotiations have been continuing at pace in the last two months to ensure that we secure a deal on the time-limited implementation period that both we and the Commission want to agree by the March European Council. The Prime Minister has advocated this implementation period from the start, and first mentioned it in her Lancaster House speech. The implementation period will provide greater certainty for individuals and businesses, meaning they will only have to plan for one set of changes in the relationship between the UK and the EU. The business community has been clear on the
importance of this to its planning, and the period will ensure a smooth exit and transition to our future partnership after the UK leaves the European Union in March 2019. We have of course published a legal text on the arrangements for the implementation period and we look forward to taking further significant steps.

As I have said, a key part of DExEU’s role is to lead and co-ordinate work across Government. We have been working with Whitehall Departments to help them to plan for all scenarios, sharing assumptions and scenarios and making sure we have the right legal and administrative systems in place. The Department returned £20 million of original Budget allocation to the Treasury to help to fund other Departments, with an additional £2 million being transferred to other Government Departments as a result of a transfer of responsibilities. In terms of wider financial support for EU exit, over £250 million has been approved by the Treasury as needed in 2017-18 to prepare for EU exit work across a range of Departments. The Chancellor announced at the 2017 autumn statement that a further £3 billion will be available to Departments.

Time has run short in this debate. I will just pick up one or two of the points raised by the hon. Member for Darlington regarding the Prime Minister’s Europe adviser. The departmental and ministerial responsibilities are set out clearly on gov.uk. The Europe unit supports Olly Robbins in his role as the Prime Minister’s EU sherpa. As such, it supports him as the lead official and the Department is glad to work with him.

As time has run so short, I will finish by simply saying that I have listened extremely carefully to the debate, in particular to the points on the customs union, but the Government’s position remains as stated.

Stephen Gethins: I thank all Members for their contributions. This is a big undertaking, and it is incredibly important that Members have the opportunity to analyse as much information as possible. I note the remarks by the Chairman of the Brexit Committee. I also note the remarks of the Minister acknowledging the work of civil servants. I hope that he will shine a light, as far as possible, on their economic analysis and what it means. Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54(4)).

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, That, at the sitting on Wednesday 28 February—

(1) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy not later than three hours after their commencement; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(2) notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business), the Private Business set down by the Chairman of Ways and Means shall be entered upon at the conclusion of proceedings on the motion relating to Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy (whether before, at or after four o’clock) and may then be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours, after which the Speaker shall interrupt the business; and the business may be entered upon after the moment of interruption.—[Paul Maynard.]

Hon. Members: Object.
Diabetes

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

10 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about this very important health issue. I should first declare an interest as an active member of the all-party parliamentary group on diabetes, ably chaired and led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz).

We have come a long way with the treatment of diabetes since 1921, when Banting and Best isolated insulin from dog pancreases, and then, working with Scottish physiologist J. J. R. MacLeod, purified a form of insulin that was suitable for human treatment from cows’ pancreases. This was at the time, and remains, a major scientific and Nobel-prize winning breakthrough. Before insulin therapy was discovered, diabetes was a deadly illness. The first medical success was with a boy with type 1 diabetes—14-year-old Leonard Thompson, who was successfully treated in 1922. Close to death before treatment, Leonard bounced back to life when treated with insulin.

Now, almost 100 years later, we understand a lot more about diabetes. We are able to explain the difference between type 1, an autoimmune disorder that is treatable by insulin; and type 2, insulin resistance or insufficiency, much more influenced by other health factors such as obesity and physical inactivity. We also know that a diagnosis of diabetes is no longer a death sentence. Nevertheless, diabetes remains a serious illness that affects 4.5 million people in the UK.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the excellent work she does as vice-chair of the all-party group on diabetes. She mentioned those who have diabetes, but there are still about half a million people who have type 2, as I do, but do not know that they have it. Does she agree that prevention is the most important thing that we can do to try to help those who have type 2 but are not aware that they have it?

Liz McInnes: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I think he must have read my speech, because I will be talking about the prevention of type 2 diabetes, and how important it is that we are aware of that and also make the population aware of the measures they can take.

There are more people living with diabetes in the UK than with any other serious health condition—more than dementia and cancer combined. The complications of diabetes are many. They include eye, foot and skin complications; anxiety and depression; hearing loss; gum disease; neuropathy; infections; slow wound healing; strokes; heart failure; heart attacks; lower limb amputations; renal problems; and early death.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The diabetes crisis is one of the fastest growing health crises of our time. As the hon. Lady says, the physical consequences are well known, but recent research by Diabetes Scotland has shown that the stress, isolation and trauma of managing an invisible but life-threatening condition can have serious implications for a person’s emotional wellbeing. Does she feel that we need to look at offering support and increased provision of psychological support for diabetes sufferers?

Liz McInnes: I absolutely agree. The hon. Lady makes an excellent point, and I will cover that later in my speech.

As the hon. Lady says, the number of people living with diabetes is rising fast. Every day, around 700 people are diagnosed—that is one person every two minutes. It is estimated that by 2025, 5.2 million people will be living with diabetes. With 10% of the total NHS budget being spent on diabetes every year, it is important that we talk about treatment, prevention and the future of diabetes care, particularly as 80% of these costs are spent on the complications of diabetes, many of which are avoidable through better care.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. I declare an interest, as a type 2 diabetic, like the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). There are some 100,000 people with diabetes in Northern Ireland at present, and we have the largest number of type 1 children in the whole of the United Kingdom. The issues in Northern Ireland are very acute. Does she agree that the NHS should widely fund not only insulin pumps for children with type 1 diabetes, but training, to ensure that children can use those pumps, to make their lives better? I think it is important that we do so.

Liz McInnes: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I will talk about the technologies that are available for the treatment of diabetes and about education and information, so I hope I will answer his question later in my speech.

The hon. Gentleman emphasises the point that I was going to make, which is that it is really important that we listen to the voices of those living with diabetes. The charity Diabetes UK recently published a report entitled “The Future of Diabetes”, based on a consultation with more than 9,000 affected people. Those people said that, as well as a need for a better understanding and awareness of diabetes, there are a number of ways in which diabetes care can be improved.

In 2016 the Care Quality Commission produced a report entitled “My diabetes, my care”, based on a survey of a smaller number of people, but it came to very much the same conclusions. People living with diabetes want more support for their emotional and psychological health. The effect of varying blood sugar levels on mood and the relentless need to manage the condition can affect mental health.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; she has been very generous. Is she aware that some young type 1 diabetics manipulate their insulin to get rapid weight loss, and that they struggle to get treatment because on the one hand, they need psychological support, and on the other, they need advice from diabetologists? Does she agree that, if we started to bring all those different support services under one roof, it would make the route to dealing with young people who have that problem much easier?

Liz McInnes: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. In the APPG on diabetes, we have discussed the issue of young diabetics self-medicating with insulin to keep their weight down. That emphasises the point I was going to make, which is that all healthcare professionals should receive training so that they can routinely support emotional and mental health and, importantly, know when to refer to specialist support.
Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Young people find it incredibly difficult to do glucose testing. The FreeStyle Libre device is a mechanism through which young people can have regular testing without that fear. However, they have to go through an individual funding request to access that. Should that not be available on the NHS?

Liz McInnes: I completely agree, and I will discuss FreeStyle Libre patches later on. I am beginning to feel like everybody here has had sight of my speech before I have even delivered it.

The next point arising from the survey is that people living with diabetes want better access to healthcare professionals who understand diabetes. Many respondents said that they felt they were being treated as a condition and a set of symptoms rather than as a human being.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I feel I want to ask a question just to participate. Given that lifestyle choices play a big part in type 2 diabetes, what value does the hon. Lady put on the information courses that are available to people to help them to manage such lifestyle choices?

Liz McInnes: The information and education courses are really important in helping to manage the condition. I will come on to talk about that very subject later in my speech.

To go back to the role of specialists, I know from my involvement with the all-party group on diabetes that the role of the diabetes specialist nurse is valued by many. Evidence shows that diabetes specialist nurses are cost-effective, improve clinical outcomes and reduce the length of stay in hospital. With rising numbers of diagnoses of diabetes, I ask the Minister to encourage employers to respond to this with appropriate workforce planning.

The third point from the survey is that people want better access to technology and treatments. Diabetes treatment is ever evolving and advancing, but 28% of those who took part in the survey reported problems in getting the medication or equipment they needed to manage their diabetes. The Minister may recall that last year the Prime Minister was seen at an event wearing a FreeStyle Libre patches later on. I am beginning to feel like everybody here has had sight of my speech before I have even delivered it.

The fourth point is that people living with diabetes want more support and understanding at work and school. Good care at school is vital and all schools should have an effective care plan in place. For those in work, an understanding and informed employer can make the difference between that person being able to continue in productive work, and being forced to leave because of difficulties in managing their condition while at work.

Finally and most importantly of all, people living with diabetes want hope for the future. Once diagnosed, people live with diabetes for the rest of their lives. They want to know what is being done to work towards a world where diabetes can be prevented and cured. It is for that reason that I asked for this debate—so that we can discuss research, funding, awareness, treatment, support, information and education for those living with diabetes.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that groups such as the Bristol South Diabetes Support Group are really important in bringing together volunteers to support people across the country? Does she support those volunteers, who not only supplement the work of the NHS but give people the confidence to manage their work?

Liz McInnes: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is up to healthcare professionals to encourage those voluntary groups to get together, to enable people to give each other support. That was one of the findings of the Diabetes UK survey: people wanted to come together to offer each other support.

Jim Shannon: Further to that point, this morning’s news reported on the millennium child and an increase in diabetes as a result of diet. Does that not underline exactly what the hon. Lady has argued today, which is
that we need to do something now? If the millennium child—the adult of tomorrow—is going to have high levels of obesity and diabetes, there is a real need for a strategy right now.

**Liz McInnes:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman’s very important point. I was struck by that item on the news first thing this morning. It is coincidental that it was announced today and I will refer to it in my concluding remarks.

For type 1 diabetes, research priorities include reducing hypoglycaemic episodes, exploring the effectiveness of different insulins and technologies, and research into the artificial pancreas, which monitors blood sugar levels and automatically injects the right amount of insulin.

For type 2 diabetes, people want to know whether their diabetes can be cured, for example through surgery or very low calorie diets. Encouraging work is being done on low calorie diets, and a trial funded by Diabetes UK—the diabetes remission clinical trial—showed that almost half of type 2 diabetics who took part were in remission after 12 months.

We need to help people to reduce their risk of developing type 2 diabetes, and that means tackling the reasons for the increasing rates of obesity, particularly childhood obesity. The PREVIEW project—prevention of diabetes through lifestyle, intervention and population studies in Europe and around the world—showed that a weight loss of 10% of baseline weight can decrease insulin resistance, which is a causative factor in diabetes, and this is expected to reduce by 85% the three-year risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

In conclusion, I have two requests for the Minister. The first is that we build on progress being made through the NHS diabetes programme and commit to sustained transformation funding at current levels of £44 million a year until at least 2021. The NHS diabetes programme sets out to improve the treatment and care for people with diabetes. Investing now will allow us to reap substantial financial and social benefits in the future.

My second request is that we strengthen the childhood obesity plan, including measures on labelling and junk food marketing. Just this morning, Cancer Research UK called for the same action. I am sure that the Minister will appreciate that taking steps to tackle childhood obesity will improve the health of the nation and have an impact on all obesity-related illnesses, not just diabetes. We want mandatory traffic-light labelling on all processed foods and mandatory calorie labelling in the out-of-home sector. We also want a commitment to introduce a ban on the marketing of junk food on TV before the 9 pm watershed.

The childhood obesity plan is key in helping us realise a world where fewer people live with diabetes and where it is easier to live a life with a low risk of developing type 2 diabetes. However, as we heard on the news just this morning, the millennial generation are predicted to be the most obese yet, and it is vital that the Government act now to avoid a diabetes health crisis in the future.

10.19 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine):** I thank the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), whom I know well and have worked with already on this in my time as a Minister, for giving us the opportunity to debate such an important issue. The turnout for this Adjournment debate suggests that it is of great interest to the House. It is normally just me, the Member introducing the debate, my Parliamentary Private Secretary and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Tonight’s turnout has been a revelation. In November, I remember the hon. Lady introducing me and leading the event in the Terrace pavilion for the launch of the “Future of Diabetes” report by Diabetes UK, which is the biggest study of its kind. I promised then that I would respond recommendation by recommendation to the report, which I believe I have done. The offer I gave then is the offer I repeat now, which is to work with the all-party group and the charity on each and every one of those recommendations. I hope she knows I am sincere in saying that.

I would like to use this opportunity to pay tribute to Diabetes UK—led by the excellent Chris Askew, whom I have known for many years wearing other hats when he used to lead the breast cancer charity Breastbreakthrough—which continues to work both with us in government and independently to improve the lives of so many people who are at risk of this increasingly common condition.

Diabetes is one of the biggest health challenges facing the country, and the figures are truly sobering. There are currently 3.5 million people in the UK who have been diagnosed with diabetes. If nothing changes, by 2025 more than 5 million people will have the condition. That is a significant public health challenge. Type 1 diabetes affects 400,000 people in the UK and its incidence is increasing by about 4% a year. It is not preventable, so the emphasis is on improving the lives of people with type 1 diabetes and helping them to manage their condition. During half-term recess, I paid a visit to a brilliant charity in your constituency, Mr Speaker, called Medical Detection Dogs. I met a brilliant dog who looks after a lady with diabetes. As if on cue, when I walked into the room to meet her he sat and put his paw on her knee, which was him assessing her levels and indicating that she needed to take action. It was incredible to watch. If Members are not familiar with Medical Detection Dogs, please do look it up.

Type 2 diabetes, as we have heard, is much more common. It is a leading cause of preventable sight loss in people of working age and a major contributor to kidney failure, heart attacks and strokes, among the many other conditions the hon. Lady read out in her cheery list. Diabetic foot disease, including lower limb amputations and foot ulcers, accounts for more days in hospital than all other diabetes complications put together. According to Diabetes UK, 11.9 million people in the UK are at high risk of developing type 2 diabetes, which is largely preventable.

Aside from the human impact on people’s lives, the financial cost of diabetes and its complications is huge. It already costs the NHS in England over £5.5 billion a year and that figure continues to rise. Managing the growing impact of diabetes is one of the major clinical challenges for us in the 21st century. That is why, as the hon. Lady and the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) who chairs the all-party group so well rightly say, preventing type 2 diabetes and promoting the best possible care for all people with it is a key priority for the Government.
The hon. Lady mentioned the child obesity plan. She was absolutely right to do so. She knows I am passionate about delivering part 1 of the plan. We always said that it was the start of a conversation and that it was called part 1 for a reason. I am absolutely committed to taking further action if necessary, particularly across marketing, reducing portion sizes and price promotions, to help young people and to make healthy choices become the easiest choice of all. I think she knows me well enough to know I mean what I say and I say what I mean. If we need to take further action we will do so and she should watch this space.

Steve Brine: That would be very interesting—if the hon. Lady did that, I would be grateful. We are working hard to improve diabetes services. The Government are strongly committed to taking action to prevent diabetes and to treat it more effectively. The Government’s mandate to NHS England for 2017-18 includes an objective for NHS England to “lead a step change in the NHS in preventing ill health and supporting people to live healthier lives.”

Mr Howarth: The Minister will be aware that an algorithm exists whereby it is possible to create an artificial pancreas, and that the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation is heavily involved in research at the University of Cambridge to bring that concept to a workable proposition. Will he give a commitment that the Government will fully support that work so that we can end up with something that will help type 1 diabetics to monitor their condition?

Steve Brine: I will not give a commitment at the Dispatch Box, but I know the JDRF well. I have supported it in my constituency through various events, including the Alresford music festival, which I am sure the right hon. Gentleman is familiar with. I will take a look at what he said and if he wants to chat to me offline about that, I would be very happy to do so.

The diabetes prevention programme has been mentioned. Wherever possible, the aim is to prevent type 2 diabetes from developing in those most at risk. I am proud to say that NHS England, Public Health England, for which I am responsible, and Diabetes UK have had some success working on the NHS diabetes prevention programme—the first such programme that we have delivered at scale nationwide. I know that a lot of other countries are looking at what we are doing.

The programme is putting in place support for behavioural change in people who have been identified by their GP, or through the NHS health check, as being at high risk of developing diabetes. Individuals can then get tailored, personalised help to reduce their risk of developing the condition, including bespoke exercise programmes and education on healthy eating and lifestyle. It is incredibly positive.

I am aware of the time, so I will move on to treatment and care programmes. After successfully securing significant new investment in diabetes through the spending review, NHS England has developed a diabetes treatment and care programme, which is aimed at reducing variation and improving outcomes for people living with diabetes. As part of that, NHS England will invest £42 million in proposals from individual CCGs, collaborations and sustainability and transformation partnerships to improve the treatment and care of people with diabetes.

Steve Brine: I will not take another intervention, because I will conclude in just a second. The spending review made provision for significant transformation funding through to 2020-21, and I expect that to be spent in line with the priorities set out in NHS England’s mandate, including for diabetes.

We have talked about the childhood obesity programme and the national diabetes prevention programme. I am responsible for other public health initiatives, such as Change4Life and the One You programme. People like me with young children will see the Change4Life branding coming through in book bags for them. It has been an incredibly successful campaign. The programmes are crucial in both encouraging a healthy lifestyle and promoting exercise among young people, as are such things as the Golden Mile, which is almost universal in primary schools across England. The benefits of such programmes should be acknowledged in reducing not only the incidence of diabetes, but other debilitating and life-threatening conditions such as cancer and heart disease, in which I also have a great interest.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: Yes, but then I might not be able to conclude.

Rachael Maskell: Very quickly on the issue of exercise, children are now reduced to just one hour of PE. Will the Minister speak to his colleagues in the Department for Education about increasing that?

Steve Brine: I am not responsible for the Department for Education, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that I talk to it. I was in the Department with the Secretary of State and a Minister just last week talking about what further action we need to take on school food standards and the Golden Mile, because I want children to be more active. It is not just about what happens in school, though: the exercise through the Golden Mile in schools should be mirrored in out-of-school activity. There is so much more that we can and should be doing to help to prevent diabetes.

In conclusion, diabetes is emblematic of many challenges that the health and care system and my desk face. Prevention is critical, as is working in partnership with people in a way that tailors support and intervention. I, this Government and this Prime Minister are committed to improving outcomes not only for the millions of
people in this country who are living with diabetes, but for the many more who are at real risk of developing the condition. We need to help both.

Question put and agreed to.

10.30 pm

House adjourned.
Local councils have faced devastating cuts. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that, between 2010 and 2020, councils will have had their direct funding cut by 79%. In Tower Hamlets, we have lost £138 million through budget cuts since 2010. With one of the Conservative party’s own councils going bust, will the Minister now finally commit to properly funding local government in tomorrow’s local government finance settlement?

Elizabeth Truss: We have provided local councils with council tax flexibilities to enable them to fund spending in their areas. It is absolutely right that councils should not waste money and should find savings. The fact is that we went through an incredibly profligate period under Labour in which the Government were running record deficits, and we have succeeded in reducing the deficit by three quarters. I must also point out to the hon. Gentleman that councils have reserves of £23 billion. In fact, those reserves have increased by £8 billion since 2010.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): In Cumbria, the Labour council leaders failed to reach a devolution settlement with the Government that would have brought in additional resource. Does the Minister agree, however, that this is not just about resource and that it is also about council structures, leadership and creating efficient organisations?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Lots of councils have done things better and more efficiently, and have led the way across government. We have given more powers to local Mayors, and we are giving Mayors across the country £4.8 billion of new investment over the next 30 years.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What priority does my right hon. Friend attach to local authorities building new housing?

Elizabeth Truss: It is vital that we see more housing built across the country, and that is why in the Budget we committed to 300,000 homes a year being built over the next decade.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury join me in paying tribute to Kent County Council, which has managed to make substantial savings and efficiencies since 2010, while continuing to provide excellent services?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have seen the leadership of numerous Conservative councils across the country in finding new and efficient ways of doing things. That is what we need to do as a Government. We need to find better ways of doing things and more efficiency, rather than wasting money and crushing the economy, as happened under the previous Labour Government.

Rushanara Ali: Local councils have faced devastating cuts. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that, between 2010 and 2020, councils will have had their direct funding cut by 79%. In Tower Hamlets, we have lost £138 million through budget cuts since 2010. With one of the Conservative party’s own councils going bust, will the Minister now finally commit to funding local authorities properly, so that they can provide vital services to their communities?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have pointed out, it is right that we rebalance council spending from central Government grants to locally raised taxes, to help to keep councils accountable. We have seen councils up and down the country finding innovative ways of working, such as sharing back-office services and doing things such as installing wi-fi and improving waste collection. We have also seen Labour councils wasting money. For example, Momentum-supported Birmingham City Council bin strikes have cost the taxpayer £40,000 a day, and Reading—

Mr Speaker: Order. Resume your seat, Minister. That is the end of it. You answer for Government policy. You do not waste the time of the House by launching into rants about the policies of other parties. I have made my point, and if the Chancellor is confused about it, he really is under-informed and I say to him: stick to your abacus, man.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: My own council of Brighton and Hove has had to make £52 million-worth of cuts in three years, despite superb Labour leadership in the city. With one of the Minister’s own Tory councils going bust, will the Chancellor finally commit to properly funding local government in tomorrow’s local government finance settlement?

Elizabeth Truss: We have provided local councils with council tax flexibilities to enable them to fund spending in their areas. It is absolutely right that councils should not waste money and should find savings. The fact is that we went through an incredibly profligate period under Labour in which the Government were running record deficits, and we have succeeded in reducing the deficit by three quarters. I must also point out to the hon. Gentleman that councils have reserves of £23 billion. In fact, those reserves have increased by £8 billion since 2010.
goes on adult social care. Does the Minister think that a postcode lottery of which counties can afford the most council tax should determine whether their elderly get looked after decently?

Elizabeth Truss: We have put additional funding into social care, and we have also allowed councils to raise the precept, but it is a very important principle that local councils are accountable to local voters for the money they spend. The situation we inherited in 2010, when 80% of the money came from the Government, meant we could have profligate local councils and local taxpayers would not have to foot the bill.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): This week, having faced the same central Government cuts as everyone else, Conservative-controlled Kettering Borough Council, of which I am a member, can be expected to freeze its council tax for the eighth year in a row. Does it therefore appear that some councils are better at managing their affairs than others?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I note that council tax doubled under the previous Labour Government, and we are hearing talk from the Opposition that there might be another rise if they were to get into government again.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The issue of public sector pay is inextricably linked to the level of funding provided to both local authorities and other public bodies. Will the Chief Secretary commit to lifting the public sector pay cap across the board and to properly funding these pay increases?

Elizabeth Truss: We put an extra £2 billion of spending power into the hands of the Scottish Government at the last Budget, and we have also said that we want to be flexible over public sector pay to make sure we are retaining and recruiting the best possible staff.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): First, if you will forgive me, Mr Speaker, as we came into the Chamber we heard the news of the death of Simeon Andrews, who co-ordinated a large number of all-party groups and trade union groups, and, if we can, I would like us to send our sympathies to his family on behalf of the House.

The ministerial responses we have heard demonstrate absolutely no understanding whatsoever of the crisis created by the cuts of the past eight years and their impact on local government. Local councils are now facing a funding gap of nearly £6 billion by 2020, and it is the most vulnerable in our society who are suffering. The number of children taken into care is at its highest level since 1985, and one in three councillors are warning that the cuts have left them with insufficient resources to support these children. The leader of the Chancellor’s own Surrey council said:

“The Government cannot stand idly by when Rome burns.”

Will the Chief Secretary commit today to use the opportunity of next month’s spring statement to address the funding crisis in our local councils?

Elizabeth Truss: First, the spring statement is not a fiscal event, and it is vital that we maintain the discipline that we have achieved over the past eight years and keep control of public spending, because that is what has led to the strong economy we are now seeing, with record levels of employment and an increasing number of new businesses starting up. The reality is that if Labour were to get into power, that legacy would be squandered.

Local government will see a 2.1% increase in cash terms between 2015 and 2019, and, as I have pointed out, they have also seen an increase in local council reserves of £8 billion—money available to spend on, and invest in, local services.

John McDonnell: With the crisis in children’s services, to be frank this is not the time for political knockabout responses. I am not sure whether the Chief Secretary has witnessed a child being taken into care; I have, and it can scar that child for life. But do not listen to me; listen to the all-party inquiry into children’s social care, which warned that nine out of 10 councils are struggling to meet their legal duties to children. The president of the Association of Directors of Children’s Services has said:

“We cannot go on as we are”,

and it is reported that over half the councils in England are planning further cuts to children’s services.

Recent estimates of Government spending and income show that the Chancellor will have sufficient resources to protect our children from further cuts. So I appeal—one again—to the Chancellor to use the flexibility he has to use the spring statement to address the £2 billion funding gap in our children’s services, to protect our children.

Elizabeth Truss: It is a bit rich of the right hon. Gentleman to suggest that we should not bring politics into this when that is precisely what he is doing. We are making sure that local councils have the flexibility to raise council tax to fund these vital public services. Labour has to acknowledge that this is not just about the money we spend but the way we spend it. The reality is that if the entire focus is on the level of spending rather than what we are doing, we end up with the situation that occurred in 2010—vast increases in spending and services actually getting worse.

PFI Contracts and Carillion

3. Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Whether he has reviewed his Department’s procedures for authorising and monitoring private finance initiative contracts as a result of the liquidation of Carillion.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows this, but just to put it in context, the vast majority of all current PFI projects—86%—were signed under the previous Labour Government. Since coming into office in 2010, this Government have reformed the approach, so that now PF2 contracts deliver better value for money for taxpayers. The performance of PFI contracts, including those where Carillion is involved, are monitored by the procuring authorities. New PF2 contracts will be subject to a rigorous value for money assessment. There are currently no PF2 projects in procurement.

Graham P. Jones: I am concerned about the workers. Apparently, 90% of Carillion’s private sector contractors have suggested that they will continue to pay staff, but only in the interim period. What about the 10% who are
Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman may be slightly confusing PFI contracts with outsourcing contracts that do not involve capital structures. The resolution of Carillion continues. So far, there has been a very high rate of uptake by private clients of Carillion to continue the services that are being delivered, and we have high hopes of protecting the vast majority of the jobs involved.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What are the Government doing to improve transparency in public-private partnerships?

Mr Hammond: We absolutely value transparency in the public-private partnerships that are delivered. They are an important part of the overall infrastructure. As I just explained to the House, there are currently no PF2 projects in procurement. That indicates that we have set the bar for value for money in public-private partnerships very high, and we will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a rather extraordinary state of affairs. I hope that the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) is not indisposed, and if he is I am sorry, but otherwise there is absolutely no basis for his leaving the Chamber during the exchanges on his question. That is a rank discourtesy to the House—and a discourtesy to the Chancellor as well, for that matter. It must not happen.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The shadow Chancellor recently wrote to the Chancellor asking when he will produce revised value for money guidance, that indicates that we have set the bar for value for money in public-private partnerships very high, and we will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: I ha ve not yet received a letter from the shadow Chancellor, but if he has written to me, I shall of course reply to him and answer his questions.

Road and Rail Investment

4. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of the effect of the national productivity investment fund on road and rail infrastructure in the north-west.

Robert Jenrick: The latest statistics show that we have had the best run of productivity growth since before the financial crisis, but we are certainly not complacent. The national productivity investment fund is improving passenger journeys, our roads and our broadband connections and delivering more homes, all of which are key to raising the wages and living standards of people in Southport and across the country.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The problem is that the national productivity investment fund is not doing anything to stop the disrepair on our roads and motorways. The Government are simply not putting in enough money for local councils and the national agency to make sure that repairs on motorways and local roads are brought up to standard. We now have a greater crisis than we have seen for some time.

Robert Jenrick: I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman’s analysis. The Government have put a record amount of investment into our roads and rail. As the Chancellor announced in the autumn, there is further money for transport projects in the north. There is £13 billion in total to improve transport across the north of England.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con) rose—

Robert Jenrick: I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. Lady Dodds represents a north-west constituency.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): This Government have done nothing to deliver local rail infrastructure in the north-west, which is vital for jobs and the economy. When are they going to invest in decent local rail services, including those used by my constituents from Southport to Manchester? If the Government will not do it, they should stand aside and let us get on with the job.

Robert Jenrick: The Government have been investing more in railways across the country than any Government since Victorian times, including in the north of England. Across the country, the Government have invested £0.25 trillion in infrastructure projects since 2010, 4,500 of which have already been completed.

Major Infrastructure Investment

5. Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What plans the Government have to invest in major infrastructure during the 2017 Parliament.

Robert Jenrick: The latest statistics show that we have had the best run of productivity growth since before the financial crisis, but we are certainly not complacent. The national productivity investment fund is improving passenger journeys, our roads and our broadband connections and delivering more homes, all of which are key to raising the wages and living standards of people in Southport and across the country.

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Robert Jenrick: The Government have been investing more in railways across the country than any Government since Victorian times, including in the north of England. Across the country, the Government have invested £0.25 trillion in infrastructure projects since 2010, 4,500 of which have already been completed.

Major Infrastructure Investment

6. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of the effect of the national productivity investment fund on road and rail infrastructure in the north-west.

Robert Jenrick: The latest statistics show that we have had the best run of productivity growth since before the financial crisis, but we are certainly not complacent. The national productivity investment fund is improving passenger journeys, our roads and our broadband connections and delivering more homes, all of which are key to raising the wages and living standards of people in Southport and across the country.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The problem is that the national productivity investment fund is not doing anything to stop the disrepair on our roads and motorways. The Government are simply not putting in enough money for local councils and the national agency to make sure that repairs on motorways and local roads are brought up to standard. We now have a greater crisis than we have seen for some time.

Robert Jenrick: I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman’s analysis. The Government have put a record amount of investment into our roads and rail. As the Chancellor announced in the autumn, there is further money for transport projects in the north. There is £13 billion in total to improve transport across the north of England.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con) rose—

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Major Infrastructure Investment

7. Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): What plans the Government have to invest in major infrastructure during the 2017 Parliament.

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Major Infrastructure Investment

8. Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What plans the Government have to invest in major infrastructure during the 2017 Parliament.

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Major Infrastructure Investment

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): As my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury has just told the House, there has been more than £0.25 trillion in public and private investment in infrastructure since 2010. We continued to invest in infrastructure in the autumn Budget 2017 by expanding
the national productivity investment fund, so that it will now provide £31 billion of additional investment, including more than doubling the housing infrastructure fund to £5 billion. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said after the Budget that our plans will see public investment increase to levels not sustained in 40 years.

Julian Sturdy: Through the major road network, vehicle excise duty will be made available for investment in strategic roads outside the remit of Highways England. I understand that economic growth must be a priority, but how much will the pressure of future housing developments be considered in any of these future schemes? My constituency in York, for example, is surrounded by the northern ring road and we have a lot of housing coming forward.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right that the major road network will support the creation of new housing developments by improving access to future development sites and boosting suitable land capacity, so investment decisions for this funding will include consideration of how proposed schemes will unlock land for housing developments, helping to improve how transport is planned for new developments at the outset. The ring road to which he refers is, of course, part of the proposed major road network.

Priti Patel: The Chancellor will know of the great eastern main line taskforce, which has made the economic and business case for rail infrastructure directly to the Treasury. He will also know that Greater Anglia commuters are forking out £3.7 billion to the Treasury under the current rail franchise. Will he ensure that we can get some of that money back out to invest in the much-needed infrastructure improvements for which our commuters are campaigning?

Mr Hammond: My right hon. Friend is a great champion of infrastructure in Essex, and I share her wish to create a more dependable railway with an increased focus on punctuality and reliability, which is why the Government are pursuing the biggest rail investment programme since Victorian times. Under the Greater Anglia franchise, there is a commitment to deliver more services and faster journey times, including two “Norwich in 90” trains each way a day from May 2019. The great eastern main line proposals are currently at an early stage of development, but we will carefully consider the case she has made for the passing loop.

Giles Watling: Will the Chancellor update the House on the steps being taken to ensure the Government’s ambitious plans for housing are supported by local infrastructure investment, such as through the housing infrastructure fund?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right to observe that we cannot build the homes this country needs without infrastructure. Often, the push-back from local communities against the idea of accommodating greater numbers of homes is caused by the fear that infrastructure will not keep pace. The autumn Budget 2017 more than doubled the housing infrastructure fund, taking it to a total of £5 billion. On 1 February 2018, we announced the first £866 million of investment from that fund to support 133 projects, which will unlock infrastructure for up to 200,000 new homes.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): It is now two years and two months since the Boxing day floods hit much of Yorkshire, including my constituency. Kirkstall in Leeds is no better protected from floods than it was on Boxing day 2015, and the Government still have not signed off money for the phase 2 Leeds flood alleviation scheme. When will that happen? The scheme is urgently needed to protect my constituents and local businesses from devastating floods such as those that we have already experienced.

Mr Hammond: My constituency has also been affected by flooding, and some of the responses are major engineering projects that take time to develop. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Environment Agency have funding for flood relief projects, but those developments have to be prioritised and worked up into proper business cases. I will look at the specific case the hon. Lady raises and, if I may, I will write to her and place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Some of the most important national infrastructure projects include the network of tidal lagoons for low-carbon energy. As the Treasury has, apparently, approved the project as good value for money, why is it allowing dinosaurs in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to block it?

Mr Hammond: I imagine that the right hon. Gentleman is referring to the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project which, as he knows, is under consideration by the Government. An announcement will be made in due course.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Contrary to the Treasury’s own assessment, a report by the Institute for Public Policy Research North recently found that transport investment in London is two and a half times higher per capita than in the north. We know that in Norwich Britvic is shedding hundreds of jobs, citing poor transport as a key cause. That inequality hurts business and local authority revenue, so what actions will Ministers take to redress this unjust imbalance? Will they commit to working with the Mayors of Manchester and Liverpool on the convention for the north that was announced this morning?

Mr Hammond: I just do not recognise or agree with the hon. Gentleman’s figures. The Infrastructure and Projects Authority’s analysis shows that infrastructure investment per capita in the north is actually higher than in the south-east.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Chancellor has spoken out in favour of rebalancing the economy via a fairer distribution of transport spending. Will he therefore consider Transport for the North’s strategic transport plan, which calls for a 50% increase in transport spending across the north of England?

Mr Hammond: The Government are committed to the northern powerhouse project and recognise that that has to be supported through infrastructure investment. We are looking at northern powerhouse infrastructure
investment projects on a case-by-case basis, and we will continue to support the development of the northern powerhouse.

**Leaving the EU**

6. **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the economy of the UK leaving the single market and the customs union. [904033]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** The Government are undertaking a wide-ranging set of analyses of the impact of our departure from the European Union. This is changing through time as we develop our approach and we move to a bold and comprehensive agreement with our EU partners.

**Geraint Davies:** The Chancellor knew in 2016 that the majority of people would prefer a soft Brexit to a hard Brexit. I am referring to remainers, plus people such as me on both sides of the Chamber who support our remaining in both the customs union and the single market do so in the name of prosperity and of upholding democracy?

**Mel Stride:** The Government have made their position very clear: we are leaving the European Union, and that means we are leaving the customs union and the single market. However, we are determined to negotiate a deal under which our trade with the EU27 is as frictionless as possible and we are able, as a globally facing nation, to secure free trade agreements with other countries around the world.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the Conservative Government are and will continue to be the voice of British business, and that securing a strong economic future will be at the heart of the Brexit negotiations?

**Mel Stride:** I thank my right hon. Friend and the business colleagues from his constituency. We are potentially interested in free ports and will keep the idea under review.

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Many Cabinet members have made their views clear about the single market and customs union. The Chancellor has said that he would like to see no tariffs with Europe after we leave the EU and no hard border in Northern Ireland. His exact words, which were in a letter to the Treasury Committee, were that he wants a deal “that facilitates the freest and most frictionless trade possible in goods between the UK and the EU, and allows us to forge new trade relationships with our partners in Europe and around the world.”

Will the Financial Secretary therefore welcome the speech that the Leader of the Opposition gave yesterday in which he proposed a new UK-EU customs union that would, to quote the Chancellor directly, facilitate “the freest and most frictionless trade possible in goods between the UK and the EU” and allow us to “forge new trade relationships with our partners in Europe and around the world”?

**Mel Stride:** I am here to speak about Government policy, as you have quite rightly indicated, Mr Speaker. However, if I may say so, Opposition Members’ zig-zagging in respect of their position on the customs union has been quite extraordinary. If I understand what is being suggested, it seems to me, at a first take, that the idea that we can be in the customs union yet go out and have a high level of control over deals and free trade arrangements with other countries just does not hang together.

**The Welsh Economy**

9. **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effect of Government investment on the Welsh economy. [904636]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** My hon. Friend will know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced an additional £1.2 billion for Wales in the Budget. We maintain our position of ensuring that Welsh Government funding per head is some 15% or more above the rate in England. As a
consequence of those and other measures, Wales is now one of the fastest growing of the nations and regions of the United Kingdom.

**Chris Davies:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that leaving the UK single market would represent a far bigger risk to the Welsh economy than leaving the EU single market?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend is entirely right. It is a simple fact that some 80% of Welsh exports go to the other nations of the United Kingdom, compared with just 12% going into the European Union. Those figures speak for themselves.

**Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Traditionally, Wales has lower wages than the rest of the economy. In the light of low productivity and growth forecasts, what are the Government doing to attract high-quality jobs to the Welsh economy?

**Mel Stride:** As the House will know, we are doing a great deal for productivity throughout the country. We have agreed two city deals in Wales, with £500 million for Cardiff and £115.6 million for Swansea. Since 2010, employment in Wales is up by 7.3% and unemployment is down by 39%.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): My question is this: what investment? The Government have broken their promise to electrify the main line between the two main cities in my country, they will not commit to the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, and the Swansea Bay city deal is 90% Welsh public and private money. At the same time, the Government are subsidising the most expensive railway in the world—in England. When will the British Government stop taking Wales for a ride?

**Mel Stride:** I am surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman level those accusations against the Government because, as I have explained, we set aside an additional £1.2 billion for Wales in the recent Budget. I have referred to the two city deals, and we are also backing the south Wales metro, as he will know. We are committed to agreeing further growth deals with north and south Wales.

**EU Exit Analysis**

10. **Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary for Exiting the European Union on the Government’s preliminary EU exit analysis; and if he will make a statement.

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer** (Mr Philip Hammond): The cross-Whitehall analysis referred to is provisional internal analysis—it is part of a broad, ongoing programme of analysis—and further work is in train. The analysis has been developed as a tool to inform Ministers on the European Union Exit and Trade Committee and its Sub-Committees about the choices that must be made as negotiations progress.

**Catherine McKinnell:** I thank the Chancellor for that answer. Does he agree with the former permanent secretary at the Department for International Trade that giving up the single market and the customs union is like giving up a three-course meal for a packet of crisps in the future? If not, can he identify what specific evidence his Department has seen to suggest that the benefits of future trade agreements will outweigh the damage of leaving the single market and the customs union to businesses and jobs across the country, particularly in the north-east?

**Mr Hammond:** The Government intend to maintain the greatest possible access for British businesses to European Union markets. The hon. Lady is right that we should approach this on the basis of evidence. We should look for evidence of the value of our trade flows with Europe and what jobs they generate in the UK, and we should look objectively at the opportunities that arise with third-country trade deals and with the likely profile of the new jobs, trade and opportunities that can be created, and then weigh those carefully.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Leaks from the Brexit analysis show that UK Government borrowing will rise dramatically under Brexit, with figures ranging from £45 billion to £120 billion in a worst-case scenario. Can the Chancellor reassure us that he will not cut vital public services to plug this gap?

**Mr Hammond:** As the hon. Lady knows, the analysis to which she refers is based on standardised, off-the-shelf trade models. The Government are seeking a bespoke deal with the European Union to deliver a deep economic partnership, which would have a completely different set of outcomes. That remains our objective.

**Public Sector Pay and Equality**

11. **Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): What equality impact assessments his Department has undertaken on the Government’s policy on the public sector pay cap.

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury** (Elizabeth Truss): It is for Departments to consider the equalities impact of their proposals on workforce strategy and pay. The important thing is that we reward public servants fairly for the work they do.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** Well, public sector servants have certainly not been rewarded fairly, but let me turn to pay differentials in the private sector. Is the Chief Secretary as concerned as I am that many private sector firms are excluding partners’ income in their reporting obligations on the gender pay gap, on the basis that they are not employees? What will the Government do to close that loophole?

**Elizabeth Truss:** We have announced new policies on reporting the private sector pay gap. The pay gap has come down under this Government and we are now seeing a record number of women in work, and the reason is that we have taken the difficult economic decision to close the deficit and ensured that we have allowed the private sector to flourish.

17. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): With inflation at 3% and Government cuts to council tax and police budgets forcing up precepts, why should low-paid workers, who are predominantly women, have an increase of only 1% next year, after four years of 1% already?
Elizabeth Truss: First, I point out that those on the lowest pay have seen their real wages rise by 7% since 2015, which is the highest level for some time. Also, it is women who are more likely to be in work, with record levels of employment. We have also given additional flexibility to public services to ensure that they can recruit and retain.

Household Debt

12. Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): What plans he has to tackle household debt. [904039]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government are taking a proactive approach to support borrowers, to aid people to manage their money well, and to help those in problem debt. We reformed the regulation, giving the Financial Conduct Authority considerable regulatory powers, and we are setting up a new single financial guidance body to make it easier for people to get help with money matters.

Imran Hussain: After seven wasted years, wages are still lower than they were in 2010. Self-employed people are paid less on average than they were a generation ago and 6 million people are earning less than the living wage. Does the Minister share my alarm that too many people have to worry about buying school uniforms, affording a family holiday, or even just paying their rent or mortgage?

John Glen: The Government recognise that it is very important that we focus on the poorest people in our society. That is why we have increased the national living wage by 4.7%, which will mean a pay rise of £600 for those working full time. We have also increased the personal allowance, frozen fuel duty and increased childcare support to attend to the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): As part of the Treasury Committee’s inquiry into household finances, we are looking at the problems facing financially vulnerable households. Last week, my Committee colleague, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), and I visited the citizens advice bureau in Nottingham. Caseworkers there told us about the problems caused by banks and companies, but said that the harshest creditor of all is the Government. There is little forbearance for late council tax or welfare overpayments, and bailiffs are often the first port of call, rather than a last resort. Is the Minister concerned by this heavy-handedness? Does he agree that central and local government should lead by example in their treatment of the most financially vulnerable?

John Glen: I acknowledge the vital work that my right hon. Friend and her Committee are undertaking in this important area. We will be implementing a breathing space as part of the work of the single financial guidance body. The Bill establishing that body is in Committee, as my right hon. Friend will know. I am absolutely determined that we will get this right and listen to best practice across the country. We committed in our manifesto to a six-week breathing space, and we will look carefully at the representations received from across the country.

22. [904049] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Citizens Advice reports that there are universal credit claimants who are having more than 40% of their standard allowance taken from their monthly payment. There is a 40% cap on repayments to third parties, but that does not appear to cover repayments of advanced or budgeting loans. This is leaving people unable to make ends meet—for example, one person retained just £97. Will the Minister agree to meet his colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that people are not pushed into debt by the Government’s rules?

John Glen: Of course I will meet with colleagues in government. I am meeting the relevant Minister as we seek to get this legislation right, and I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman as well.

Leaving the EU

13. Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the potential merits for the economy of the UK adopting an EEA Norway-style arrangement after the UK leaves the EU. [904040]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Membership of the European economic area would require free movement of people with the rest of the European Union, and the UK Government have been clear that the free movement of people cannot continue as it does now. We are seeking a bespoke, comprehensive and ambitious economic partnership in the mutual interests of the UK and the EU.

Antoinette Sandbach: The Government’s own forecast suggests that a no-deal Brexit will cut GDP growth by 12% in the north-west of England. What steps is the Chancellor taking to minimise the impact of a no-deal, WTO-terms Brexit on my constituents in Eddisbury?

Mr Hammond: As I said in answer to a previous question, the figures to which my hon. Friend refers are based on standardised trade models, not the bespoke deal that we are seeking to achieve. She asks what steps I am taking to protect her constituents’ interests. I am supporting my colleagues in seeking to negotiate an ambitious economic partnership with the EU that delivers the maximum possible benefits for both the EU and the UK.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What assessment has the Chancellor made in particular of the potential benefits of EEA membership for the £91.8 billion contribution to the UK economy made by the creative industries that are so important for my constituents in Bristol West?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the creative industries are one of Britain’s great success stories. More broadly, our services sector is our strategic strength in many respects. As we negotiate our future relationship with the European Union, we have to ensure that we protect not only the market in goods, but the market in services, where Britain has such significant comparative advantage.
Technological Progress

14. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that the economic benefits of technological progress are shared throughout the UK.

John Glen: The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): By helping all places to access the benefits of technological progress and reach their full potential, we can drive growth at national level. Since autumn 2016, the Government have announced an additional £7 billion for science and innovation—an increase of about 20% to total Government R&D spending by 2021.

Chris Green: Does the Minister agree that digital technology enables further devolution away from London of high-tech industries? What are the Government doing to support that?

John Glen: The Government are expanding Tech City’s reach across the UK, creating Tech Nation by investing £21 million over four years to help people grow digital businesses. That includes a large-scale City Verve smart city demonstrator in Manchester, which demonstrates how the internet of things, technologies and services can improve local services in transport, energy, health and culture.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Newcastle has national centres of excellence in data, health and energy—key drivers of our future economy. On Saturday, I held a business summit with Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, at which start-ups identified attracting investment as a key barrier to their growth. What are the Government doing to attract investment to businesses in Newcastle? Does that include a regional business bank, as supported by Labour?

John Glen: We certainly have a national bank to encourage investment in small businesses. We also have the £400 million digital infrastructure fund. As a Minister, I am doing all I can to ensure that we find the best conditions for investing in small and medium-sized enterprises across the country.

Regional Infrastructure Development

15. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to support regional infrastructure development.

Robert Jenrick: I am delighted to hear the positive story that the hon. Gentleman has given to the devolution that we have created as a Government. In the past week I have met the Mayors of Liverpool and Greater Manchester. We are committed to working with anyone who shares our commitment to the economic growth and prosperity of the north of England.

The Scottish Economy


The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government are committed to driving up investment in Scotland; my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced an additional £2 billion at the last Budget. We have already boosted city deals by £1 billion and have committed further to looking at city deals in Stirling, Tay Cities and the borderlands.

Andrew Bowie: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will share my concern, and that of my constituents, at recent statistics showing that trend-based productivity in Scotland had declined by 3.2% in the year end to September 2017—well below the levels of the UK and its lowest level in eight years. Does he agree that instead of making Scotland the highest-tax part of the UK and increasing the tax burden on businesses, the Scottish Government should be encouraged to follow this Government’s lead—encouraging enterprise, boosting economic development and growing UK productivity to its highest levels in 10 years?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the critical issue of productivity, which is, of course, the responsibility of not just this Government but the Scottish Government. I totally agree with him about the tax matter that he raised. It is important that we keep taxes down. To the extent that that has been achieved in Scotland, it has been to a large degree because of the changes we have made to the personal allowance—a decision taken by this Government in this House.

Local Authority Funding

18. Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on trends in the level of funding for local authorities since 2010.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We have made sure that local councils have the full ability to serve local residents by giving them additional council tax flexibility.

Fiona Onasanya: I thank the Minister for that answer, but between 2010 and 2020, Peterborough City Council will have had its direct funding cut by 78.7%. Can she explain how my authority is expected to meet the rising children’s services and adult social care demands?
Elizabeth Truss: As laid out in the local government settlement, councils have been given the ability to increase council tax levels to pay for those services. It is vital that those taxes are raised locally, so that local councillors are accountable for the decisions they make.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government will move promptly to a new fair funding formula for local government to replace the untransparent and unfair system? Will she look closely at the Leicestershire model for doing that?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Local government funding has not been fair enough. That is why we are consulting on a fair formula at the moment, and I will look with interest at his representations.

Deficit Reduction

20. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What progress is being made on reducing the deficit. [904047]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): In 2010, we had a post-war record level of deficit at 9.9%, and we have reduced that to 2.3% as of last year. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecast in November is that the deficit will further decline to 1.1% of GDP by 2022-23.

Robert Courts: Will the Minister give an estimate of the effect that our deficit reduction measures have had on relieving the tax burden for younger generations?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises a critical point about the importance of getting the debt down to make sure that future generations do not carry the burden of it. That is why we have reduced the deficit by three quarters and why we are going to hit our reduction in the level of debt as a percentage of GDP two years early, in 2020-21.

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

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is a really eager young pup, and at this early point in his parliamentary career, I think we ought to hear the fella.

Mr Sheerman: Mr Speaker, you will know that I am not the most radical Member on the Labour Benches, but I want to tell the Minister that if the Government had been successfully reducing their budget, my constituents in Yorkshire could forgive her. The fact of the matter is that we have had the money for the electrification of the trans-Pennine railway stolen from us, and the Chancellor refuses to give it back. When will he make amends?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman will know, whether he is young or a puppy or whatever he may be, we are awaiting the business case for the trans-Pennine project, and when we receive it, we will look at it most closely.

Gender Diversity

24. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of gender diversity in the financial services sector. [904052]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): In summer 2015, the Government asked Jayne-Anne Gadhia, CEO of Virgin Money, to lead a review into gender diversity in the financial services sector. In response, the Treasury launched the women in finance charter, which asks firms to commit to four key actions as recommended in the review. So far, 162 firms have signed the charter, which covers more than 600,000 UK financial service employees.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for that excellent answer. Following the Royal Mint’s appointment of its first female chief executive in its 1,100-year history, will the Minister join me in congratulating her on her new role?

John Glen: Yes, I am delighted to congratulate Anne Jessop, and I wish her all the best in her new role. If I may, Mr Speaker, I would also like to take this opportunity to applaud and congratulate my own constituent, Minette Batters, who was elected as the first woman president of the National Farmers Union. I wish the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs all the best with that.

Mr Speaker: I am sure he will read that with some anxiety.

Topical Questions

T1. [904055] Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of the British people, and I will do so by building on the plans set out in the autumn Budget. This Government are determined to meet the important challenges we face and to seize the opportunities ahead as we create an economy fit for the future. Our balanced approach to the public finances enables us to give households and businesses support in the near term and to invest in the future of this country, while also being fair to the next generation by reducing a national debt that remains far too large.

Sir Hugo Swire: Reducing tourism VAT to 5% after we leave the European Union would create an extra 121,000 jobs and £4.6 billion in revenue to the Treasury over 10 years. It would be a great boost not only to our great cities, but to our great coastal towns, such as Exmouth, Sidmouth and Budleigh Salterton in my East Devon constituency. Will the Chancellor commit to looking again at this issue as we leave the EU?

Mr Hammond: My right hon. Friend is nothing if not persistent and consistent. I cannot remember how many times he has raised this issue. There have been numerous requests for new VAT reliefs since the referendum, some of which are currently not permitted under EU law. We have calculated that if we were to grant all the VAT relief requests that we have received, that would come to more than £38 billion a year. The Government have received representations on VAT and tourism, and we are looking again at the case for change.1 We have issued a call for evidence on the impact of VAT and
air passenger duty on tourism in Northern Ireland, and we will certainly keep this issue under careful review.

**Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab):** The Chief Secretary gave a speech last year calling for better value for money from the public finances and not spending money we do not have, and she has talked about not wasting money today, so how can she justify spending hundreds of millions of pounds on further tax giveaways worth £2,000 per child to the wealthiest families—those, for example, using private schools—via the tax-free childcare scheme? Is that not a waste of money and spending money we do not have?

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):** I would point out to the hon. Gentleman that the voucher scheme invented by the previous Labour Government benefited only 600,000 families whereas our scheme is much broader—it benefits 1.5 million people—and the Labour Government’s scheme was open to private schools and private nurseries as well.

T3. [904057] **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Last week in the Chamber, we yet again heard an Opposition MP complain that they believed they should personally be paying far more tax. Will the Minister confirm the mechanism by which anybody can currently do exactly that voluntarily?

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** As a Minister at the Treasury, I am delighted if people voluntarily step forward to pay more tax than they are due. I am pleased to inform my hon. Friend that that is already possible by way of a gift to the Crown. I am looking at ways of raising awareness of that particular opportunity, and I would be happy to meet him to discuss such options. I would also point out to right hon. and hon. Members the very generous gift aid reliefs that the Treasury provides for those who wish to make direct payments to charities of their choice.

T2. [904056] **Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): Four in 10 of Enfield’s children are living below the poverty line, which is almost 34,000 children. The borough is the 11th most impoverished area in the UK, and my constituency is now among the top 20 constituencies in the country with the fastest growing levels of child poverty. Is the Chancellor pursuing any kind of joined-up policies with other relevant Departments to do what the Prime Minister said, and “make Britain a country that works not for a privileged few, but for every one of us”.

**Mel Stride:** The Government believe that work is one of the most important drivers of bringing people out of poverty, and we are rolling out universal credit as a consequence. There is evidence that that is more successful as a way of doing so than relying on legacy benefits. As the right hon. Lady will probably know, 200,000 fewer children are now in absolute poverty than was the case in 2010.

T5. [904059] **Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Ind): What preparations has the Treasury been making for leaving the European Union, and will the Treasury be ready on day one to ensure frictionless borders when we leave the European Union—deal or no deal?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** The Government are continuing with detailed preparations for all possible March 2019 scenarios, including ensuring that Departments have adequate resources to prepare effectively for EU exit. To date, the Treasury has allocated to Departments nearly £700 million for preparation activity, and we are currently in the process of allocating the 2018-19 funding from the additional £3 billion over two years that I announced at autumn Budget 2017.

T4. [904058] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): “The health and social care system has been pushed to its limits in recent weeks”—those are not my words, but those of my local hospital trust. Last month, it was forced to cancel about 325 operations and 640 outpatient appointments. That not only means that my constituents who are unwell or in pain are being made to wait longer for treatment but makes the trust’s already challenging financial situation even worse. When is the Chancellor going to give our health and social care system the sustainable funding it needs?

**Elizabeth Truss:** The hon. Lady should acknowledge that the NHS has been rated as the best healthcare system in the world. We recognise that there are extra demands on the health system and that is why we put in an extra £6.3 billion of funding at the Budget.

T6. [904060] **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What progress has been made in reducing the level of corporation tax evasion?

**Mel Stride:** I am delighted to inform the House that considerable progress has been made in reducing the level of tax evasion, avoidance and non-compliance in the corporate sector. We have been at the forefront of initiatives launched with the OECD—the base erosion and profit shifting initiative, the profit diversion tax we made either separately or jointly with the Department for Transport of how external initiatives on competitiveness and investment might help the rail sector and Network Rail in particular?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** Strictly, this is an issue for my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary, and he is looking at how to improve productivity in the railway and how to ensure that every pound we invest in the
railway delivers the maximum possible benefit to railway users. He will make further announcements in due course.

Mr Hammond: I am sure that when I go home and reflect on it, the deep meaning of that question will become clear to me. What I will say to the hon. Lady is that if we look at how goods and services flow freely between different parts of our own economy, and indeed between different parts of the United Kingdom, we see at once the huge benefit that it brings to have frictionless borders as we move our goods and services.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I am very much in favour of gift aid, but some large charities say that they receive no direct support from Government but do receive gift aid and the Exchequer will not publish those figures. Will the Chancellor reconsider this?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Revenue does not disclose the sums that individual charities receive from gift aid due to its obligations to respect taxpayer confidentiality under the 2005 legislation. Of course, some large charities do so voluntarily. Cancer Research is one example, and receives £31 million in this way. I am sympathetic to my right hon. Friend’s argument and will take the matter forward.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Ryanair has announced the slashing of more than 20 Glasgow airport routes, a cut of more than 1 million passengers and the loss of up to 300 jobs. The high level of APD and the delay in introducing the air departure tax—caused by this Government’s not notifying the European Commission regarding the ongoing exemption for the highlands and islands—have been cited as a reason. Another is the Brexit uncertainty in the aviation sector. With more routes and jobs likely to go, what are the Chancellor and his colleagues doing to support the aviation sector during Brexit negotiations?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the devolution of ADT has been delayed after consultations between ourselves and the Scottish Government. Both Governments are satisfied with the arrangements. As for Ryanair, I believe that part of the announcement was also that the company would be extending the number of routes out of Edinburgh airport.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): If we want a sustainable rise in wages, we will need higher productivity. Does my right hon. Friend therefore welcome the recent improvement in the figures?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes. We have had two quarters of good productivity data, but we should recognise that the productivity challenge we face is long term. The Government have taken a range of measures to address it and we will watch the evolution of the data very carefully, but there is certainly absolutely no scope for any complacency about the scale of the challenge we face, and we are determined to rise to it.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Artificial intelligence brings huge economic opportunities, but to date big tech companies have seemed even more likely than traditional corporates to engage in aggressive tax avoidance and concentrate power in the hands of a narrow, homogenous group of people. What will the Treasury do to ensure that companies in this growing industry pay their own way fairly and take account of their wider corporate responsibility to society?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady will know that we made announcements in the Budget in respect of the taxation of digitally based businesses that operate from digital platforms and so create value as a consequence. We are consulting on the measures we may take. We said in our consultation document that it is possible we will look at revenue taxes as one particular approach. Our preference is a multilateral move with our partners in the European Union and the OECD, but we are prepared to go it alone if that proves necessary.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The services sector makes a huge tax contribution to the public purse. What confidence can the Chancellor give to my constituents who work in financial services that our new free trade agreement will cover services as well as goods?

Mr Philip Hammond: We are clear that a future comprehensive trade partnership with the European Union must include goods as well as services. A deal can only be done if it is fair to both sides, and because of the shape of the UK economy it would be very difficult to see how any deal could be fair if it did not include services. We have heard it asserted that it is impossible for services to be part of a trade agreement. I do not believe that that is the case. Next week, I shall make a speech in which I will set out our view of how it is possible to include services within such a trade deal.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Chancellor referred earlier to what he called the “continued prosperity” in the UK. Will he undertake to ensure that a simplification of the tax system is undertaken by looking at the level at which low paid full-time and part-time employees get the first £300 a week free of national insurance and income tax, to try to raise prosperity among all sections of the community?

Mr Hammond: We will continue to seek to simplify the tax system, although I have to say that my personal observation is that whenever there is a proposal to simplify, those who benefit from complexities quickly speak up. They are not always people on high incomes; they are often people on lower incomes. We shall continue to try to simplify the system in a way that is fair and appropriate for all.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): While accepting that the Ministry of Defence is in need of serious reform as well as more money, will the Chancellor confirm that he has agreed with the Secretary of State for Defence that there will be no further reductions in
capability while the modernising defence review takes place, and that the money required to do that, in the region of £2 billion, will be forthcoming?

Mr Hammond: As the House will know, I had the privilege to serve for nearly three years as Defence Secretary and I yield to no one in my admiration for the work of our armed forces. I also understand how complex and challenging managing the defence budget is: it is a multi-annual budget with many complex procurements. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I are working very closely with our right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary as he carries out the modernisation review. We will ensure that defence has the funding it needs to continue to defend this country appropriately.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): North Derbyshire clinical commissioning group finished last year £27 million in the red, and £16 million of cuts were demanded. In spite of closing hospital beds at a time when they are most needed, it will again end this year £27 million in the red. When will the Government give the NHS a sustainable settlement to enable it to provide proper services?

Elizabeth Truss: We have given the NHS a sustainable settlement. It received an additional £6.3 billion, but it is also important that we reform our healthcare services, that we put in place sustainable transformation plans, and that we are investing in capital and new technology and making sure that we use our fantastic frontline workers—nurses and doctors—in the best way possible.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): As the Chancellor knows, investment in infrastructure is key to ensuring that we can build the thousands of homes that this country needs. Will the Chancellor agree to meet me, other Hertfordshire MPs and the leader of Hertfordshire County Council to discuss how we might be able to do that in Hertfordshire, where we need to deliver about 100,000 new homes?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes, I am always delighted to meet my hon. Friend and his colleagues. Hertfordshire is one of the high-pressure housing areas, where it is absolutely essential that we deliver additional housing if we are to improve affordability.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Cold weather payments were triggered in all postcodes in my constituency yesterday—information that I shared on social media—yet a constituent contacted me this morning to say that when she contacted the universal credit people, they said they knew nothing about it. Given the freezing weather and the fact that people will be nervous about turning on their heating if they do not know they can pay for it, will the Minister work with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to resolve the situation as soon as possible?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I will look into the point that she raised immediately. This is obviously an immediate issue in relation to the cold weather that we are having now. I will find out and let her know later.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am awfully sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues. I allowed some injury time because a wholly disproportionate amount of time was spent discussing the policies of parties other than the Government, but we must now move on.
Mental Health Act: CQC Report

12.41 pm  

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): Thank you very much for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. This morning, the Care Quality Commission published—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am immensely grateful to the hon. Lady, but she needs to say, “To ask the Minister for a statement, etc.” She will get her full go—her full bite at the cherry—when the Minister has delivered the initial statement. That is the way it works.

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the Care Quality Commission’s report, “Monitoring the Mental Health Act in 2016/17”.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): The Government welcome the CQC’s latest annual report, which it produces as part of its statutory duty to monitor how mental health providers exercise powers and discharge their duties when people are detained under the Mental Health Act 1983. We are committed to ensuring that the Act works better for patients and their families, and this is why we have commissioned an independent review led by Professor Sir Simon Wessely, which will make recommendations in autumn. We are also investing more in mental health than ever before, spending an estimated record £11.6bn this year.

We have seen that the number of detentions under the Act has been rising year on year: it rose by 2% last year and by 9% the year before that. We also know that black people are disproportionately affected. These were both driving reasons for the Prime Minister’s decision to call for a review of how the entire Act is operating. The Government have already acted when they saw that the Act was not working properly. Last year, we legislated to make it illegal to use police cells as places of safety for children under the Act, and to ensure that police officers consult health support staff before using their detention powers.

Sir Simon, his vice-chairs and the independent review’s team are consulting actively and widely with service users and professionals, and today are taking part in a major stakeholder event in Newcastle. Indeed, I welcome the fact that the CQC takes care in its report to state: “We have confidence that the independent review’s solutions-focused approach to identifying priorities, based on the feedback and experiences of people across the country, will offer a review of the MHA that has the confidence of patients and professionals.” The CQC is, of course, directly involved in that review.

The CQC’s report found examples of good practice, but we recognise that more needs to be done to ensure that people’s voices are heard and their rights respected. Where possible, we expect all patients to be involved in their care planning and that providers should consider how best to do this in the light of the CQC’s recommendations. In the spring, the review will provide an interim report identifying priorities for its work. It will then develop a final report containing detailed recommendations on its priorities. This final report should be delivered by autumn 2018.

There are problems with the Act, and we will address them, but we should remember that today no one gets sent to an asylum only to disappear within its walls. There are regular reviews, clear rights of appeal and checks to ensure that people are lawfully detained only to get the treatment they need. Our society is changing how it thinks about mental illness, however, and we want to ensure that people have as much liberty and autonomy as possible.

Luciana Berger: This scathing report finds that too many patients subject to the Mental Health Act continue to experience care that does not fully protect their rights or ensure their wellbeing. Some Members might have seen the harrowing episode of “Dispatches” last week, which showed scenes of a patient experiencing violent restraint at the Priory Group’s Dene Hospital. Today’s CQC report indicates that these experiences are not isolated. It shows no improvement in key areas of concern raised by the commission in previous years. It is totally unacceptable. In fact, some of the indicators are getting worse. Why is there still no evidence of patient involvement in 32% of care plans—up from 29% last year; of patients’ views being recorded in 31% of care plans—up from 26% last year; and of consideration of the least-restrictive care options in 17% of cases—up from 10% last year? This last, in particular, is a matter of serious concern. We know that the period following discharge from in-patient care is when most suicides happen. Why, then, in 24% of care plans was there no evidence that plans were made for discharging patients back home?

The report exposes the pressure on high secure hospital placements for women. One patient was in long-term segregation for over a year while waiting to access a bed. The Minister, to whom I listened closely, referred to the review by Sir Simon Wessely, but his review and report cannot provide answers to this patient or many hundreds more across the country today. Despite repeated Government promises of parity of esteem, we have seen yet another year of inaction. Does she accept that, in 2018 here in England, what is outlined in today’s CQC report is completely unacceptable, and will she tell us exactly what she is going to do this week to ensure that no patient in our country in a mental health unit is deprived unnecessarily of their human rights?

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is worth reminding the House why we introduced the CQC—to provide for transparent inquiry into the performance of our health services and so ensure they remain the best in the world. It is for precisely this reason—to make sure we do better—that we invite the CQC to do so so honestly and take any criticism arising from the transparent scrutiny that characterises this and all its reports. We recognise that we can always do better. The duty of candour in the NHS under this Government means that we will step up to the plate and respond to these challenges.

The hon. Lady describes the report as “scathing”. In fact, it highlights a positive direction of travel on access to advocates and promoting good physical health, and an improved direction of travel on care after discharge, so I do not accept the tenor with which she characterised the report. I would go further and quote the deputy chief executive of the CQC, who also highlighted the parallel review by Sir Simon Wessely. He says: “We have confidence that the independent review’s solutions-focused
approach to identifying priorities, based on the feedback and experiences of people across the country, will offer a review of the MHA that has the confidence of patients and professionals.” The report also highlights that Sir Simon Wessely is already undertaking and identifying actions that can be taken outside new legislation, and the CQC is very much part of delivering that.

Far from being complacent, we recognise that we have a long way to go, which is one reason the Prime Minister has put mental health firmly at the top of our health agenda. The report identifies a positive direction of travel, but we will continue to turbo-charge it and deliver sustained improvements in mental health services.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Are there any proposals to address the fact that three quarters of GPs have no formal mental health training?

Jackie Doyle-Price: One of the things that we are doing in prioritising mental health is dealing with exactly that issue. We are having discussions with every part of the health community. We recognise that all the professional organisations have a role in spreading best practice, but we need to do that as well, and the CQC report—and the fact that we are undertaking these reviews so transparently—will help us to do it.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Today’s report lays bare the problems that are at the heart of the Government’s short-sighted and incoherent approach to dealing with mental health issues. The CQC has found the system to be “under considerable pressure”, with no improvement in the areas of concern raised in previous reports.

Rather than taking a preventive approach to mental health treatment, the Government have made real-terms funding cuts which mean that more people are at risk of being detained and fewer detentions are being prevented. Crucially, those cuts are causing less restrictive alternatives for the community to be removed at the same time as the reductions in the number of beds for admissions. As the report tells us, the number of detentions under the Mental Health Act 1983 has risen by 36% since 2010, and between 2015 and 2016 it rose by more than 5,000. Will the Minister note that between 2000 and 2009 rates of detention fell, largely owing to investment in community services by the last Labour Government?

Recent research by the Royal College of Psychiatrists showed that mental health services have less money to spend on patient care in real terms than they did in 2012, and more than a quarter of clinical commissioning groups underspent their mental health budgets last year. The Government make many claims about the funds that they have pledged to mental health services—as the Minister has today—but it is clear that the money is not reaching the frontline. The CQC thinks that reform of mental health legislation on its own will not reduce the rate of detention, and reductions in mental health beds and community services are clearly contributing to the rise in the number of detentions. Is it not time to increase funding for mental health, and to ring-fence mental health budgets?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I repeat that we have increased mental health spending by £11.6 billion. The hon. Lady suggested that a quarter of CCGs are spending less than their allocations on mental health, but that is not the figure that I have. We believe that 85% of CCGs have increased their mental health expenditure in excess of their allocations, which does not chime with what she said about community services. It may give her some reassurance to know that from next year, NHS England will ensure that the mental health investment standard forms part of its planning guidance. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady says “Next year”, but, as I have said, 85% of CCGs are already meeting the standard, and those that are not are experiencing intervention from NHS England. We are satisfied that the 85%—and it will be 100% next year—are investing more in mental health services beyond their allocations.

I agree with the hon. Lady, and indeed with the CQC report, that the review of the Mental Health Act is not the entire answer. That is the reason for the CQC’s annual inspections, and we will act on its recommendations, but central to the work that Sir Simon Wessely is leading is identifying non-legislative action that we can take in order to make the system work better, and we are involved in many cross-Government initiatives that will enable us to do exactly that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The report also concludes that the number of mental health wards without ready access to GPs has fallen from 25% in 2013-14 to just 7% now. Is that not welcome news, and another step in the right direction?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. He has highlighted both the reason why we tasked the CQC with conducting annual inspections and an instance in which, having been given a conclusion and a set of recommendations, we have delivered, and we will do the same in respect of this report.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The report makes clear the need for a major shift in focus that will place patients at the centre of their care. What is required is a human rights approach in which the least restrictive option is adhered to. Detention must be the last resort.

A key issue is that patients feel invisible in the present system. Will the Minister go to the frontline? Will she visit the hospitals, speak to the staff about resourcing, and speak to the patients and the carers who are in, and have been through, the system? Will she hold the focus groups that are so badly needed with patients and carers to ensure that the system is overhauled and their voices are heard?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The ethos that the hon. Lady has outlined is very much the one that is being proposed by Sir Simon Wessely, which is why he is organising round tables, but I assure her that I am visiting services at the frontline as well. At the core of the point that she has made is the issue of a rights-centred approach for mental health patients, and that too is at the centre of Sir Simon’s inquiry. Patients need to be empowered to ensure that they receive the right treatment. Central to that is the whole issue of consent, which is something that very much concerns me, and not just in the context of mental health. We may be able to take the lessons from Sir Simon Wessely’s review and apply them elsewhere in the NHS.
James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Does the Minister agree that a better laydown of mental health services, involving crisis houses and step-down facilities, might end the need for people to be admitted to acute mental health facilities in the first place, or else support them immediately after their discharge? Will she join me in encouraging the Somerset CCG to ensure that such facilities are available in that county as well?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend reached the nub of the issue in that final point. Commissioning is a matter for local commissioning groups. However, through the CQC report, the work that we are doing through the mental health investment standard and the scrutiny applied by NHS England, we are trying to ensure that there is a consistent application of good-quality services around the country. We find some centres of excellence and some areas in which the service is less patchy, but when it is less good it obviously leads to worse outcomes. We are determined to do our best to promote the best possible services throughout the country.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the Government’s outlawing of the use of police cells for those experiencing a mental health crisis, and I do not question the Minister’s commitment to improving the service, but the system is fragmented. There have been local authority cuts, including cuts in community services. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 leaves local commissioners to decide where the money goes, which has led to a confusing local picture and fragmentation. Do we not need to give people clear pathways out of hospital, and to ensure not only that the money goes to the right places, but that individuals know their rights and that local agencies know their responsibilities?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman’s point about people knowing their rights and providers and commissioners knowing their responsibilities is crucial to the whole issue, and I think it probably underlines the lack of parity of esteem hitherto. When it comes to the role of central Government, we want to continue to rely on local provision and local commissioning, but we also need to be clear about the standards of performance that people should be able to expect. We are being more transparent about where services are being delivered well and where they are being delivered less well, but I think the work that Sir Simon Wessely is doing will shine a light on exactly that, and will enable us to engage in a much more meaningful debate about what is appropriate.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does the Minister agree that involving more patients in determining their own care packages and giving them more control over their own treatment is part of the treatment itself?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I totally agree. Feeling empowered and in control of one’s own care is quite a big part of the journey towards getting better. We are very concerned that we are still finding cases in which people are being detained under the Mental Health Act without being properly apprised of their rights under the Act, and without the support of advocates to represent them. Dealing with that is very much a priority as we drive improvement forward.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): More than half of women with mental health problems have experienced violence or abuse, so may I ask the Minister what reforms will be made to the support available to women with mental health difficulties, particularly to reflect women’s experience of abuse in coercive or controlling relationships?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady raises an issue that is close to my heart. In my opening statement I highlighted the discrimination faced by black people in detention, but I could just as easily highlight the discrimination faced by women. As she says, if they become victims of domestic abuse or coercive relationships, they often face mental health challenges as a result, and they are more likely to be detained in those circumstances. I co-chair the women’s mental health taskforce with Katharine Sacks-Jones from Agenda, and towards the end of the year we are looking to bring forward concrete actions to tackle exactly this kind of discrimination and make mental health services more responsive for women.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a doctor, I know how carefully doctors and other health professionals consider individuals before resorting to detention under the Mental Health Act. Does the increase in detentions under the Act reflect a general increase in mental health problems in the population, or can it be better explained by a greater proportion of people becoming so unwell that they need to be detained in order to support their care? What research is the Minister doing to determine which is the better explanation, and to ensure that we identify those people who are going to become severely ill in time to treat them?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Clearly, if we can determine the causes of the increase in mental health detention, that will become part of the toolkit that we use to tackle the issue. This is one of the things that we are asking Sir Simon Wessely to look at. There are anecdotal examples of why this might be happening, but the fact that we are seeing higher rates of detention among the black community and among women raises some interesting questions that will bear further examination. I recognise my hon. Friend’s point completely. Good medical practitioners will use detention under the Mental Health Act only as a last resort, and we must ensure that that good practice is spread as far as possible.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): An acute mental health facility in my constituency has been forced to close because refurbishment would be too expensive, and patients are forced to travel a long way outside Bath. Is not a local facility much better suited to treating mental health problems than a facility that is many miles away, particularly because carers are a long way away as well?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Generally, I would say that local facilities were better, but there is also a tension between a local facility and a good facility. It is better that patients should get the best possible support rather than the closest possible support to them. That is a balancing act, and it is something that needs to be determined by local commissioners.
Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is absolutely essential that every one of us should challenge the system to give more, but could we also talk up progress where it has been made? The Sussex partnership has had a difficult past, but it has gone from being rated as requiring improvement to being rated as good, and one of its categories has been rated as outstanding. Can we praise the staff who are doing things well?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We absolutely should do that. I often think that when we are challenging each other in this place about things that are poor, we end up talking our services down, but it remains the case that the NHS is the best health service in the world, and we should always celebrate that fact. Also, the fact that we are putting mental health services under such scrutiny is in itself driving an improvement in performance, because, as we all know, sunlight is the best disinfectant.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that response, the CQC says that it has seen limited or no improvement in the key concerns that it has raised in previous years. The problems are long-standing and they have been raised by the quality regulator in previous reports to Parliament. Does the Minister not understand, when she tries to tell us that sunlight is the best disinfectant, that all we are seeing in our mental health services right now is clouds?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I would say to the hon. Lady that this report represents sunlight, not clouds. It is very transparent, and these are exactly the things that I will be holding myself and NHS England to deliver to address these points.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is very worrying to hear the CQC’s judgment that there has been limited or no improvement, especially relating to the failure to involve patients in planning their care. The Government’s review of the Mental Health Act is therefore timely, and it rightly considers evidence from people who have experienced being sectioned. The report mentions significant variation in performance. Will my hon. Friend be looking into the performance of specific organisations? Can we have more transparency about the failures, down to specific organisation level? What steps are being taken to intervene earlier and to care for people better in order to avert crises and reduce the need for sectioning in the first place?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend will be aware that, in addition to this annual review of how the Act operates, the CQC is also involved in inspections at individual provider level. Those institutions that are not performing to the standards that we expect are under close scrutiny by the CQC. In fact, I have had exchanges on the Floor of the House about some of them. I repeat my point about the spirit in which we embrace the challenges offered in the report. We have asked the CQC to undertake this annual report precisely so that we can ensure that the Mental Health Act is operating properly, and I actually welcome its frankness. I do not want to run away from the criticisms in the report, because it highlights exactly where we need to take action.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): If everything in the garden is lovely for mentally ill people, why am I constantly told by people in my constituency that another Government Department—namely, the Department for Work and Pensions—is getting loads of people who are mentally ill to be reassessed, having been out of work for several years in some cases? If the Government want to help mentally ill people, somebody should tell the DWP to stop sending these mentally sick people for reassessment.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The first thing I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that I am not pretending that everything is rosy. One of the reasons we are making this such a priority is precisely because it is not, and we are determined to deliver improvement. He mentions the DWP, but I do not think that we should write people with mental illness off and say that they can never work again. It is in that spirit that we are working with the DWP to look at where we can help people, through person-centred interventions, to get back into work if they are able to do so. That is exactly what we are doing, and I hope that it will become very successful.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Obviously, the CQC report will help to inform a lot of ongoing Government work. With that in mind, will the Minister assure the House that Sir Simon Wessely’s review will look at the concerns of people from ethnic minority communities, who have particular issues with detention at the moment?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. The increased prevalence of people with a black background being detained is very much part of Sir Simon’s review.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Is the Minister also aware of the CQC report out today that rates as inadequate the child and adolescent mental health services in the Birmingham Women’s and Children’s NHS Foundation Trust? That is partly because of its vacancy rate of 27%, which the report says has “impacted directly upon patient care resulting in poor patient handovers, cancellation of appointments, increasing waiting lists, patients waiting allocation of care coordinators, inconsistent care and low staff morale.” Does not this indicate, contrary to what she says, mental health services are not getting the resources they need, either in Birmingham or anywhere else?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I was not aware of that report, but the hon. Gentleman highlights the positive influence of CQC inspection. He has highlighted a provider for which things are not going so well, and that will enable an intervention to be made through the CQC to improve performance. In the meantime, the local commissioners in Birmingham can buy services from other providers.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister is right to highlight some of the concerning figures in this report, but there are some encouraging ones too, and does she agree that those who get a mental health problem in the United Kingdom today have a higher chance of being diagnosed, treated and making a recovery than ever before in our history, and that this is largely due to the brilliant staff up and down this country in tackling this fight?
Jackie Doyle-Price: I completely agree with my hon. Friend: they are better than they ever have been, but that does not mean we cannot do better, and we must strive to do better.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The mind and the brain are intimately associated, and I heard a horrible story this morning of a man who, after having been in and out of prison and in the criminal justice system and in and out of mental health institutions throughout his life, only really discovered at the age of 44 that many of his problems had originated from a traumatic brain injury at the age of 17. If he had been properly treated then, and had the rehabilitation that is unfortunately not available to so many people today, he would not have been through all of this round of problems. So will the Minister make sure that we get proper rehabilitation services for everybody who has a traumatic brain injury?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman gives a very powerful example, which highlights better than any other we have heard today the challenge we face. Not only was that person failed at the time of having his brain injury, but it was not subsequently picked up as he went through the criminal justice system, and I often say that we can deal with one weak link in a chain of events, but when we have a succession of them, things go horribly wrong. It is very much top of my list to make sure we have better integration of services between health and the criminal justice system, to pick up precisely those situations.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister rightly said that police cells are inappropriate places to detain people with mental health breakdown, but she and the Government must address the fact that the police have a duty of care to people in mental health crisis until they can deliver them to qualified mental health professionals. The right facilities are simply not available everywhere, and we must make sure that they are, both for the police and, more importantly, for people in the middle of a health crisis.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We have seen impressive and rapid rates of decline in the detention of patients in police cells, and I congratulate police forces and police and crime commissioners for helping to achieve that, but he is right that we need to make sure that, when people are taken to places of safety, suitable facilities are available for them.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Yesterday some of us were present when Esther Rantzen told us that calls to Childline from children with suicidal feelings had risen in 10 years from virtually none to over 22,000 last year, and the CQC report yesterday found that young patients are not receiving the mental health care they need. So can the Minister explain why only 7% of the overall mental health budget is spent on children, when children make up 20% of the population and 50% of enduring mental health condition materialise by the age of 14?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady is right to highlight that point, and that is exactly why we have brought forward the children and young persons Green Paper, recognising that the earlier we intervene, the more likely we are to delay and prevent any long-term mental health issues. We are working with the Department for Education, and we are going to be rolling out 8,000 mental health support staff to work in schools to identify precisely that early intervention. The point the hon. Lady makes about Childline raises more questions about why the number of such calls have increased, and we need to do more to understand that. We know some of the social causes that lead to poor mental health, such as domestic violence and other kinds of trauma; they have been with us for a long time. We also need to look at whether there are other environmental factors contributing to that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I say very plainly to the Minister that nobody on this side of the House is criticising the staff in the mental health services; we very much support them, but we need more of them and they need to be better resourced. Can she explain why we in West Yorkshire are one of only six authorities who have had year-on-year cuts for five years? We have now lost £20.4 million from the service. May I add that many people on the autism spectrum also find that they are in need of mental health services and they feel these cuts particularly?

Jackie Doyle-Price: As I have said, we have increased the amount of funding for mental health. That is separate, of course, to the commissioning decisions at local level by local authorities, who also have a role to play in this, as the hon. Gentleman knows. I am very conscious of the needs of people on the autism spectrum. We must give that support, and the things we are doing in terms of improving provision in schools will help identify people who are struggling with that. Planning for the future is great, but we are where we are now, and I join the hon. Gentleman in wholeheartedly congratulating staff up and down the country on their efforts in delivering a good service.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): This CQC report shows that the bad old days of poor mental health care are creeping back: insufficient staff, a doubling of restriction, and a third of patients not involved in their care plan. Why do the Government continue to fail people with mental health conditions, and when do they expect all mental health services to be made safe—the most basic of requirements?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I disagree profoundly with the hon. Gentleman. This report shows that patients have increased access to advocates, that more attention is paid to the physical health of people with mental health treatment, and that there is better planning for aftercare and discharge, but we are being honest: we still need to do better, and I expect Members to hold me to the findings highlighted in the report.
Office for Students

1.16 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Education to make a statement on the appointment of the board of the Office for Students.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Office for Students, which will be operational from April, is the biggest regulatory change to higher education in 30 years. It will run a new regulatory framework that will, for the first time, put the interests of students at the heart of higher education regulation. It will focus relentlessly on student choice and value for money and ensure that the concerns of all students in higher education in England are heard in the corridors of power. It has a wide-ranging remit and powers to deliver for students.

The OfS is ably lead by Sir Michael Barber, who has a long record of working for Labour and Conservative Administrations, including advising a Labour Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Education, and he has also been a Labour parliamentary candidate. Nicola Dandridge, the chief executive, has a background from Universities UK and as an equals lawyer. They are supported by a board of 12 further members with a wide range of talents and from different backgrounds, including senior leaders in higher education, graduate employers, and legal and regulatory experts, as well as a student representative. I am particularly pleased that Chris Millward, the director of fair access, sits on the board, putting widening participation and fair access at the heart of the organisation. Toby Young would have been just one non-executive member of this board.

The board will put quality of teaching, student choice and value for money at the heart of what it does. The commissioner for public appointments advised the Department on 11 January, two days after my appointment, that he was looking into the appointments processes for the OfS, and the Department has provided him with the relevant paperwork. We are grateful to him for forwarding his report yesterday. His report recognises the good intentions of Ministers and officials, and that the advisory panel did judge candidates on a fair and impartial basis. That said, we note his findings and will carefully and seriously consider his recommendations.

The commissioner raises important points with regard to due diligence in public appointments. We have already accepted that in the case of Toby Young the due diligence fell short of what was required, and therefore the Department has already reviewed its due diligence processes and will seriously consider the further advice from the commissioner.

The commissioner has rightly observed that it was wrong not to have made a formal request to him regarding the approach the Department took in appointing the student experience role, and therefore this was in breach of paragraph 3.3 of the governance code. We should have clarified in the announcement that it was an interim position, although the candidate had been informed of this, as had all failing candidates in the process. I understand that informal contact was made, but I accept that this should have been formalised with the commissioner. Without this formal advice and under pressure to make an appointment by 1 January, the announcement was not made in line with the commissioner’s expectations.

I can confirm that in line with the commissioner’s steer, we will shortly be launching a recruitment campaign for a permanent student experience representative, and we intend to appoint before the end of June this year. We are glad that the commissioner agrees that the incumbent in the interim role, Ruth Carlson, is free to apply. I want to put it on record that she is doing an important job, and I extend my thanks to her for agreeing to accept the interim appointment.

There are lessons to be learned here, and we will learn them. I will write to the commissioner shortly with an initial response to his findings and the next steps we will take with regard to his recommendations.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

Weeks ago, the Government told this House that the process was “a fair and open competition” and “in accordance with the code of practice”.—[Official Report, 8 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 42-52.]

But the commissioner has found that this is not the case. One candidate was rejected on the basis of their past public statements. Incredibly, this was not Toby Young; it was the student representative, rejected due to the desire of “ministers and special advisers not to appoint someone with close links to student unions”, as the report notes. Can the Minister tell us why being elected by students makes someone unsuitable to represent them? How could the then Minister tell us that it was not “reasonable” to vet social media, when that was done for the student representatives?

The report found that the appointment was influenced by special advisers at No. 10, and not by the panel. The commissioner concludes that, as the Minister said, the code was broken. Is the Cabinet Secretary now investigating that breach? Is the Minister’s predecessor really still suitable for ministerial office given the findings of this report? Does the Minister believe that after this level of interference we can possibly call the Office for Students an independent body?

The report also notes that an all-male appointment panel was used twice. Will the Minister end that practice immediately? The commissioner made a number of other recommendations. Will the Minister tell us which of the lessons that he talks about his Department will immediately? The commissioner made a number of other recommendations. Will the Minister tell us which of the lessons that he talks about his Department will take on board? He has a simple choice: learn the lessons, or make the same mistakes again. What will it be?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Lady asked a number of questions that I will take in turn. Her first question relates to having a National Union of Students rep on the board. As she will know, in addition to having a senior representative on the board, there is also a student panel. I met the student panel within, I think, the first week of my being appointed. [HON. MEMBERS: “Answer.”] I am giving an answer. I spoke to the student panel directly; it is doing a great job. There is an NUS representative on the student panel, but there is nothing to say that the person on the board has to be an NUS representative, given that the board has not been constructed to be the place where delegates of represented bodies congregate. The NUS can therefore influence what is happening in the Office for Students.
On the wider question of social media and social media vetting, clearly the social media vetting of Toby Young was not as extensive as it could have been, also given that there were 40,000 tweets.

With regard to the influence of special advisers, Members across this House will know that the way government works is that civil servants and advisers advise but ultimately Ministers decide. In making a decision, Ministers make a judgment call, especially in recruitment decisions. The judgment call in this case was that, having considered the advice from the advisory panel that had looked at the candidates and all the information, none of the three student representatives put forward was suitable. Therefore, because someone needed to be in place by 1 January, an interim member was appointed with a view to reopening the competition later on.

I take the hon. Lady’s point about the all-male appointment panel. I think that an attempt was made to make sure that the panel was more representative, but, for whatever reason, someone could not be available. [Interruption.] The key thing, if the hon. Lady will stop commenting from a sedentary position, is that three out of the five members who were eventually appointed were women. Sometimes, in these situations, it is as important to look at the outcomes as the process.

As we look at the process and the lessons that we have to learn, it is important that we do not forget the ground-breaking role that the Office for Students will play in empowering students and championing them—something that this Conservative Government have delivered that was never delivered by Labour.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s comments, but may I ask him about a wider issue? What do I do not understand about the board of the Office for Students is that, given that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have said about technical education and further education and the link to higher education, why on earth does the Office for Students not have serious individuals from the further education sector and from the apprenticeships sector, many of whom are students doing degree apprenticeships?

Mr Gyimah: The Chairman of the Education Committee asks a very important question. As he will be aware, however, this is a regulatory body for the higher education sector. He will also be aware that the panel that has been appointed for the higher education review includes some very strong representation from the further education sector. Baroness Wolf of Dulwich is very well known for her work in her reviews of further education, and Beverley Robinson is the principal of an FE college. However, this particular regulatory body is for the higher education sector.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This report confirms what we all knew—that the appointment of Toby Young, someone who expressed many misogynistic and prejudiced views, should never have happened and could only have happened due to Government meddling. During the previous UQ on this matter, the Universities Minister defended the appointment, stating that it was “made in line with the Commissioner for Public Appointment’s code of practice, and Mr Young was appointed following a fair and open competition.”—[Official Report, 8 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 42J]

Does the code of practice therefore include a recommendation to tip off a friend about open positions? If the Education Secretary expressed concern, who is actually in charge of the Department? Is it appropriate that the Universities Minister has simply been shuffled to another Department, given that the current Minister has confirmed that there was a breach of the governance code? Given the stated disparities in process and ministerial input for the candidates and the two different positions for consideration, what reviews are being taken across the entire Government, including on the role of special advisers? What is going to be done to eliminate the blâché crony appointment system that the Government have been operating?

Mr Gyimah: Just to be clear about what the commissioner has said in relation to the code, he cited a breach in relation to paragraph 3.3, which is a particular reference to the failure to consult formally—there was an informal consultation—before the announcement of the appointment of the student representative. As I said in my opening remarks, there is a lot to be learned here. The Cabinet Office public appointments team, who own the governance code, are working with the Department on the commissioner’s findings and will be writing to the commissioner about how we intend to proceed.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is the National Union of Students doing enough to counter the rise of extremism and radicalisation on campuses? What powers does the Office for Students have in that area?

Mr Gyimah: The first part of my hon. Friend’s question should be directed at the National Union of Students, but he is right that the Office for Students has a wide-ranging remit when it comes to promoting—not simply tolerating—free speech in our universities. Under the current law, the Education (No. 2) Act 1986, the only recourse if someone’s free speech has been infringed at a university is for them to go to court. The Office for Students can investigate, promote culture and, in extremis, fine universities that are not taking seriously their responsibilities on free speech. That is a huge development.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): This report is absolutely damning, particularly in relation to the previous Universities Minister and his role in this appointment. Are there not very serious questions that the previous Minister should be answering to this House about his claim that it was not appropriate and not proper to do due diligence on candidates—he made that statement from the Dispatch Box—when his Department, and he himself, ordered that very same due diligence against a candidate he did not want to appoint? When is he going to come to this House to apologise, at the very least, else further action be taken?

Mr Gyimah: The same due diligence was carried out by the same advisers on all the candidates. As I said in response to an earlier question, the due diligence could have been more comprehensive and extensive.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Throughout the general debate we have in this country on higher education, there is typically a focus—perhaps understandably—on finance. Does the Minister agree that we need to be equally focused on outcomes and on
the quality of the degrees that graduates obtain? Can he assure me that the inception of the Office for Students will help us to achieve that focus? What really matters is that our graduates have the best quality education.

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend makes the important point that, for many students at university today, the important thing is that they are getting value for money; that they get what they pay for, and that their degrees are worth the paper they are written on. That is what the Office for Students, which this Government created, is set up to do. There are lessons to be learned but, as we have these discussions, it is important that, in the big picture, we do not forget what the Office for Students can do and what it can deliver for our students.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Toby Young believed in eugenics. He made terrible remarks about disabled people. He made awful remarks about women. This is a man who the Minister’s predecessor thought was fine to be on the board of the Office for Students. What confidence should working-class young people, under-represented groups and ethnic minorities across this country have in the Office for Students if the Minister who did this cannot come to the Dispatch Box to apologise or step down?

Mr Gyimah: The right hon. Gentleman is someone who likes to have perspective and a balanced view on things, and he will know that Toby Young also set up a free school mainly to give disadvantaged people in some of the poorest parts of our country the excellent education they deserve so that they can improve their prospects in life. Yes, there are issues here that are questionable, but we always need a sense of perspective when we consider such things. Some of the things that Toby Young did are admirable and laudable, and those are the reasons why he was considered to be a serious candidate for the job.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I beg the Minister to stick to the point. We do not live in some Soviet or Putin-style kleptocracy; we are supposed to be living in a modern parliamentary democracy in which public appointments are done properly, with scrutiny and transparency. That certainly has not been the case with this appointment, and it certainly was not the case the other day when the proposed chair of the Charity Commission was unanimously rejected by the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Why cannot the Government get this right?

Mr Gyimah: It is precisely because we live in a well-functioning democracy that we are here and you—not you, Mr Speaker, but the hon. Gentleman—can ask those questions. For perspective, there were 15 appointments to the board. There are question marks, quite rightly, over the appointment of Toby Young and the process for the student representative, but 15 candidates were appointed to the board.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a sign of a well-functioning democracy that you are here, too, Mr Speaker. Does the Minister agree it is important that the Office for Students has the requisite skills and resources to be able to play its role in tackling radicalisation on our campuses?

Mr Gyimah: Absolutely. It is important that the Office for Students has the relevant skills, and also the laser-like focus and the teeth to do something about this. I am glad that we will have a regulatory body with the teeth to do that very effectively.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I start by thanking all Members who signed the letter to the commissioner for public appointments asking for his investigation. I also thank him for yesterday’s response.

Despite what the Minister says, the report clearly shows a lack of proper process in the appointment of Toby Young and in relation to the student appointment. We need to hear a lot more from the Minister about how lessons will be learned. The commissioner did not look at the person specification, which required candidates to want to contribute to the delivery of the Government’s priorities—not that they should have experience of higher education—but that politicised the process right from the outset. What will the Minister do to address that and to get the person specification checked?

Mr Gyimah: If the Government were interested in politicising the process in our favour, we would not have a former Labour parliamentary candidate as the chair of the Office for Students—he has advised Labour Prime Ministers and Conservative Ministers. All the candidates had to declare their political affiliation, which was subsequently published.

In the case of Ruth Carlson, for example, there are no discernible political views, but she is very well qualified. She is a student ambassador at the University of Surrey. She was also her second-year course representative and a member of the scholarship committee. When we think of these representatives, we should not always default to the lobby organisations or to people we think fit the bill; we should cast the net wider to bring in the widest possible experience and fresh thinking.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister has the audacity to talk about casting the net wider when another old Etonian mate of his friends has been appointed through a process that was utterly corrupt. The report says that the key question is whether each candidate was treated fairly and impartially; the answer here is no.

The Government are in absolute disarray, and the Minister is making the situation worse. He says that he is willing to learn lessons. Will he at least confront the fact that this process is not fit for a modern nation like ours?

Mr Gyimah: I stopped listening when the hon. Gentleman said that Toby Young is an old Etonian—I do not believe he ever was.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Toby Young is the chief executive officer of the New Schools Network, which has been awarded a series of Government grants to provide advice to people who are opening a free school. In the light of the blatant cronynism we have learned about as a result of the report, do the Government now intend to review those contracts and determine whether due process was followed there?
Mr Gyimah: The Department is looking at options for support around the New Schools Network. An announcement will be made in due course.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Hard cases make bad law. It is absolutely clear that the previous Minister made an outrageous, dogma-driven choice in Toby Young and, as the current Minister has admitted, clearly failed to undertake due diligence. I urge that we should not allow that to lead to the abdication of responsibility for appointments to a self-perpetuating quangocracy that looks after the great and the good.

Mr Gyimah: I reject the idea that there is a self-perpetuating quangocracy here. I have made it absolutely clear that Toby Young’s experience of setting up a free school and his commitment to social mobility meant that there were strong reasons for him to be a candidate. Of course, subsequent information has revealed that he should not have been appointed, which is why he is no longer on the board. We need to look clearly at how these processes work in the future. We will work with the commissioner and we will make sure we implement the recommendations in a way that makes the process more effective next time around. On the student representative, we have someone who is doing a sterling job and has the confidence of the chair. So perspective is needed—this is not cronyism. One appointment should not have happened and that person is no longer on the board, and we will learn lessons as far as the process is concerned.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on getting his alibi in early during his response to the statement. I should not have been surprised, because on 15 January, when he answered my written question, he unusually provided quite a lot of information about this appointment, which showed that he had looked under the stone and not liked at all what he had seen. Why is the Minister who was responsible for the appointment not being held to account for his actions under the ministerial code of conduct?

Mr Gyimah: As I have said, we will be responding to the comments of the commissioner for public appointments. The Department is working with the Cabinet Office, and we will do what the commissioner has recommended we do to make sure that this process works better in future.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): When the Government are considering this, will they think about why the same level of due diligence was not applied to Toby Young? Was it Government and ministerial interference—yes or no?

Mr Gyimah: Ultimately, this is a departmental issue. The Department has taken responsibility and will act on the recommendations of the commissioner for public appointments.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Minister rightly reminds us that this was a judgment call for the then Minister. Does this Minister think it was a sound judgment call to allow No. 10’s political advisers to blacklist anybody with NUS involvement and then to appoint somebody who was a chum by not following any proper process? Was that a good judgment call by his predecessor?

Mr Gyimah: Every decision that any Minister makes involves a judgment—it is not a scientific process. Clearly, all the issues had been gone through, with the input of the advisory panel and civil servants, and everyone involved then came to a judgment. Clearly, in retrospect, Toby Young should not have been appointed, which is why he is not on the board. In terms of making sure the process works better, the Department, which has ultimate responsibility here, will make sure that we have a much more robust and stringent process next time.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on students, may I express concern about how the credibility of the Office for Students has been damaged by the then Minister’s handling of these appointments? There is a legal requirement for one board member to have experience of representing students, yet it appears that Ministers have actually taken the best possible experience—involvement in a student union—as a reason to not make an appointment.

Mr Gyimah indicated dissent.

Paul Blomfield: I am sorry that the Minister shakes his head, because that is what the commissioner says in the report. Will he assure me that under the new process that he has indicated the Government will follow, involvement in a student union will not be a barrier to consideration?

Mr Gyimah: The reputation of the Office for Students has not been damaged by this. It has a board with 15 members. It is led by Sir Michael Barber, who is very well respected across the House, and Nicola Dandridge, who has a long and proven track record in higher education. Toby Young was going to be one non-executive board member. Of course experience of being involved in a student union is particularly important, which is why there is a member of the NUS on the student panel. As a Minister, I value students’ views, which is why I have been on a tour to talk to students across the country. It is important that student unions have an input, but it is also important that so do all the other students who do not stand for election and are not politicians, but have views on public policy and how that has an impact on them. It is important to make sure that their voice is heard, too. That is what we are doing with the Office for Students and it is what I am doing as a Minister.
Points of Order

1.44 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I asked the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation whether the person specification for the board members of the Office for Students had been checked properly and if we could be assured it met the requirements of the code for public appointments. He did not address that issue, so I wonder whether you could give any advice as to how we can take it forward.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair. Whether it momentarily slipped the Minister's mind or for some other reason he chose to focus his remarks elsewhere, I do not know. The Minister is welcome to come to the Dispatch Box if he wishes, but he is not under any obligation to do so.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): It is not a point of order.

Mr Speaker: It is not a point of order, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says. If the hon. Lady wishes to go in hot pursuit of the Minister and to seek to engage him in conversation on this matter, conceivably even over a cup of tea, it is open to her to try, although it does not look as though the prospects of her succeeding today are high.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), he said that the same due diligence was carried out by the same advisers on all candidates. That is simply not true. Would the Minister like to correct the record, based on the commissioner's findings?

Mr Speaker: I am aware of the summary of the report, but I have not read the report. Again, this is not a point of order; it is a matter of debate. If the Minister wants to engage with this, he can briefly respond, but he is not obliged to do so—[Interruption.] It appears he has been called worse, and I could have used many other phrases, but apparently he was not educated at Eton. I will come to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins)—we will save him for now.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I respect what you have just clarified, but what recourse does the House have regarding the former Universities Minister? I feel that he misled this House in his statement on 8 January, and the report by the commissioner has now clearly set out that it was a misleading statement. What recourse do we have regarding that Minister, who is not here today to answer?

Mr Speaker: I entirely understand what the hon. Lady is saying, but it is not right to accuse somebody of misleading the House, particularly when the Minister involved is not here. I think she probably wants to insert the word "inadvertently"—I think that would be safe.

Lucy Powell: Inadvertently.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I understand her concern. The Minister in question no longer occupies this office—witness the fact that the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) answered the urgent question, as he is now a Minister in the relevant Department and the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) now serves in another capacity. My advice to the hon. Lady is that she should repair to the Table Office, which is a short distance from here, to consult it as to the means by which questions may be capable of being put to that Minister which might elicit a reply. If that course of action proves not to be fruitful, I suggest that she approaches me again, perhaps with notice, giving me an opportunity to reflect, because certainly I believe in the importance of holding Ministers to account for present and indeed past actions.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) rose—

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins)—we will save him for now. He can cook for a little longer.

Robert Halfon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the Minister's gracious reply to me, he said that there should not be further education representation on the board of the Office for Students because it was about higher degrees. However, further education colleges actually do higher degrees. I just want to get that point on the record.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has made his own point and it is a factual one. It is on the record and it can be shared, not only with all parliamentary colleagues, but, conceivably, with the masses in his constituency of Harlow.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I think I ought to take the hon. Member for Chesterfield first, so the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) can wait.

Toby Perkins: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In my question, I described Toby Young as an old Etonian. I am sure he has been called worse, and I could have used many other phrases, but apparently he was not educated there and so that should not be added to his charge sheet. Will you therefore allow me the opportunity to correct the record?

Mr Speaker: Yes, the hon. Gentleman has corrected the record, and I am grateful to him for his courtesy in doing so.

Kevin Brennan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to the point of order of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), if there are no other means by which the House could hold the former Universities Minister, the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), to account, is it still in order to table a motion to reduce his salary as a way of expressing the House's concern about that lack of accountability?
Mr Speaker: That has been an option deployed in the past—there are certainly precedents for it. The hon. Gentleman, who is a person of considerable perspicacity, will certainly know the route to the Table Office by now, as he entered the House in 2001. He may wish to make that journey and to inquire about the feasibility of such an approach, but that there are precedents for such an approach I am happy to confirm.

Access to Banking Services

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.50 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I beg to move, that leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about access by customers, in particular those in rural areas, to banking services; to make provision for community banking hubs; to review access to banking services through the Post Office network; and for connected purposes.

In an otherwise fraught and divided political climate, few issues unify Opposition and Government Members from every corner of the British Isles as successfully as bank closures. In short, my Bill would: make it more difficult for banks to close branches; enable the establishment of community banking hubs; and ascertain whether the Post Office has the necessary resources truly to deliver its banking offer.

The insidious decline of the bank branch network is a long-standing phenomenon. The number of branches has halved since 1988, with more than 800 closing in 2017 and a further 250 earmarked for closure this year. In too many instances, banks are abandoning communities that have supported them for generations. That is certainly the case in Ceredigion, where bank after bank has decided to vacate.

Ceredigion was home to some of the first banking networks at the turn of the 19th century, but the 21st century has seen the seaside towns of Aberaeron and New Quay lose branches and the old market towns of Llandysul and Tregaron inherit the unenviable accreditation of being towns without any banks at all. The most recent round of branch closures includes those in the towns of Cardigan and Lampeter. There is no solace to be found in the tragic irony that these rural communities, home to some of the earliest banking networks, could soon be deprived of any at all.

The experience I have described is replicated throughout the UK. The concerns that arise from it do not in any way reflect a romantic fixation with the past or a Luddite reluctance to acknowledge that the way we bank is changing; rather, the transformation of both personal and business banking is developing in such a way as to leave some communities behind. Yes, the use of cash may well have fallen by a fifth in the past decade, and I do not doubt that the number of branch visits has fallen by a third since 2011, but we should not turn a blind eye to the fact that for many individuals and businesses, particularly those in rural or deprived areas, access to banking facilities over the counter is still crucial.

Losing over-the-counter access has a devastating impact on the local community. Too often, online banking is still a hope for the future, rather than a realistic alternative for the present. Indeed, it is often the case that those areas that have suffered branch closures also receive among the poorest broadband services. That is true of Ceredigion, where almost half of all properties do not have “decent broadband” by Ofcom standards. Without access to physical branches, and in the absence of sufficient broadband, people are simply unable to conduct their day-to-day banking online, let alone change their accounts, no matter how seamless or intuitive banks make their websites.
Compounding the lack of digital connectivity is the fact that public transport links are often poorer in rural areas, making that 20-mile or 30-mile journey to the nearest branch even more challenging, especially for the elderly, those with disabilities, and those on low incomes.

The impact of branch closures on small businesses and the local economy is also significant. As the Association of Convenience Stores has noted, 73% of rural customers still pay by cash. A 2016 Move Your Money report found that, apart from the practical difficulties that branch closures cause for the operation of small businesses, they also have a severe impact on local business finance. Bank branch closures dampen small and medium-sized enterprise lending growth by an average of 63%, and postcodes that have lost the last bank in town lose almost £1.6 million-worth of lending over the course of a year. The current trend of branch closures has a devastating impact on individuals, businesses and communities, which the Bill seeks to mitigate.

In all fairness, some banks are beginning to improve the way in which they support communities following the announcement of a branch closure. This is partly a result of the access to banking protocol and its more recent, reinforced iteration, the access to banking standard. Although some banks will adhere to, or even go beyond, the requirements detailed in the standard, it needs to be strengthened further if it is to stem the tide of closures. My Bill would build on the existing access to banking standard and place it on a statutory footing, so that customers of every bank can be assured of best practice.

Currently, communities understandably feel disconnected from the development of local bank networks, so the Bill would require banks to work more closely with the local community prior to a decision to close a branch, as part of their pre-closure assessments, and to determine what options, other than complete closure, are possible. This work would have to include proper consultation with communities so that the full impact of a closure was clear, and alternative options would have to be identified before a final decision was made.

Greater emphasis would be placed on how customers could access cash in rural areas—for example, by taking account of their proximity to a post office, another bank branch or a cash machine—and the distances would be measured in travel time rather than geographical distance. Furthermore, local transport, in addition to broadband infrastructure, would be considered as part of the process. Where the provision is so poor as to exclude customers from accessing an equivalent service, banks would need to work with others to improve the situation and, if necessary, funds should be made available for broadband schemes and skills training.

Consideration would also be given to the wider impact of a closure on a community, including the fact that a branch is often not only the last bank in town but the last service in town. In such circumstances, a bank should be precluded from closing the branch unless an equivalent alternative can be secured, or it should pay a levy to fund the provision of community banking.

To give banks and communities a greater range of options than the closure of a branch, the Bill would provide for establishing community banking hubs. In essence, such an option would enable banks to pool their resources to provide centres in which they could all be accessed by their customers. In other words, the Bill would help banks to co-locate, instead of completely vacating our rural communities. Although there is no specific regulation to prevent banks from sharing branches, such banking hubs would require significant co-operation and a fair amount of trust, in order to overcome their practical and commercial challenges. To address those challenges and inspire collaboration between banks, the Bill would encourage the creation of regional forums, which would open an avenue for banks to discuss ways in which they can work together to maintain a physical presence in communities.

The role of the Post Office, particularly its banking offer, has been referred to in many of the recent debates about community banking. The services available through its network are certainly vast, and in many instances they have served to fill the gap left by the closure of the last bank in town. If post offices are to assume this ever-growing responsibility, it stands to reason that resources will be required to ensure that staff are trained in banking services or that post offices employ those made redundant by bank closures.

Furthermore, many post offices require physical adjustments—from improving accessibility to the installation of private meeting rooms to discuss personal finance matters—to make them appropriate centres for greater banking services. Funds should be forthcoming from either central Government or the vacating banks to support such adjustments. If the Government intend the Post Office to fill the vacuum left by retail banks, they must stand ready to allocate the resources needed for it truly to flourish in this new role. Before that, a review is required to ascertain what precisely is needed. The Bill would provide for such a review.

Taken together, the provisions in the Bill would stem the tide of branch closures. It would ensure that banks give full consideration to the broader impact that closure has on communities, offer an alternative way for banks to maintain their physical presence in rural areas, and determine what support will be needed if the Post Office is to assume an even greater role.

As Professor Griggs noted in his review of the access to banking protocol, we should not wait for branches to close before “addressing the issues that some have with these changes”. Rather, banks and the public sector should work proactively to find alternatives “to help all of us feel that we are part of this journey, and not excluded from it.”

I would be glad to have the opportunity to consider other aspects of this issue, should the House give me leave to bring in the Bill, which I commend to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Ben Lake, Liz Saville Roberts, Jonathan Edwards, Hywel Williams, David Linden, Brendan O’Hara, Mr William Wragg, Stephen Kerr, Ruth Sleeper, Martin Whitfield, Caroline Lucas and Jamie Stone present the Bill.

Ben Lake accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 169).
Estimates Day

[2ND ALLOTED DAY]

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2017-18

MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Homelessness

[Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken before the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on 27 November 2017, on the Homelessness Reduction Act, HC 554; Fifth Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2016-17, the draft Homelessness Reduction Bill, HC 635, and the Government response, Cm 9443; Third Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2016-17, Homelessness, HC 40; Eleventh Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Homeless households, HC 462; Sixty-third Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Session 2016-17, Housing: State of the Nation, HC 958; and Written evidence to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Supplementary Estimates 2017–18, reported to the House and published on 21 February 2018.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I should inform colleagues that, following recommendations from the Procedure Committee, this year the subjects for the estimates debates have been chosen by the Backbench Business Committee, based on bids from Members. The subjects chosen by the Backbench Business Committee were then recommended to the Liaison Committee, which in turn, under Standing Order No.145, recommended them to the House, which agreed to them on 22 February. The first debate will be introduced by Layla Moran, who should speak for no more than 15 minutes, in accordance with the Standing Orders. Because so many Members wish to speak, after Layla Moran has introduced the debate I will impose a time limit of six minutes. Motion made, and Question proposed.

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £296,942,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £484,352,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,618,448,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—[Wendy Morton.]

2.3 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a great pleasure to introduce this estimates day debate on the spending of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as it relates to homelessness. I would like to start by thanking the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) for co-sponsoring the debate. I also thank colleagues on the Public Accounts Committee and the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, all of whom supported our bid to the Backbench Business Committee. I am delighted that so many Members wish to speak.

I draw Members’ attention to the reports of the Public Accounts Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee that are listed on the Order Paper. It was a real eye-opener to work on the Public Accounts Committee as a lead member on that inquiry, alongside the hon. Member for Chichester and the Committee’s Chair, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). I will focus my remarks today on that report, which is well worth a read.

The Public Accounts Committee heard and read evidence from a wide range of witnesses. I would especially like to thank St Mungo’s for hosting us and showing us its exemplary work, which led in large part to the questioning we went on to do. The report, which received widespread media coverage, made a number of recommendations on how the Government could more effectively co-ordinate and prioritise spending on tackling rough sleeping and helping all homeless households. These issues are of huge concern across the House and across the country, but they are of equal concern to very many members of our communities, especially on such a freezing day, in a week that is unusually cold.

In my constituency of Oxford West and Abingdon, residents regularly raise concerns about rough sleeping and provision for homeless people—it is the No. 1 issue that ha ve arisen aimed at the “fake homeless,” including one campaign in Devon that has led the police and Torbay Council to intervene because of the risk of vigilantism? Does she agree that, in the face of rising rough sleeping and homelessness, we should be taking a generous approach to those who are most vulnerable, not seeking to label them as fakes?

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that we should also be concerned about some of the campaigns that have arisen aimed at the “fake homeless,” including one campaign in Devon that has led the police and Torbay Council to intervene because of the risk of vigilantism? Does she agree that, in the face of rising rough sleeping and homelessness, we should be taking a generous approach to those who are most vulnerable, not seeking to label them as fakes?

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I completely agree that a compassionate approach is absolutely what is needed.

Following a campaign by Oxford University students, I was pleased to be able to introduce a private Member’s Bill earlier this month aimed at repealing the archaic Vagrancy Act 1824, a Dickensian law that is no longer fit for purpose.
Oxford is not alone in seeing an increase in the problem of homelessness. Anyone who has visited a town or city centre recently will know that rough sleeping is now at crisis levels. Indeed, the Public Accounts Committee concluded that homelessness is a national crisis, with the number of rough sleepers rising year on year since 2010, doubling to over 4,100 in 2016. Crisis estimates that the figure is now as high as 9,000, and possibly more. Last summer in England there were over 78,000 households in temporary accommodation—this is not just about rough sleeping—which is up by 65% since 2010. Then there are the hidden homeless: the sofa surfers or people staying temporarily with friends and family who escape national statistics on rough sleepers.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Is my hon. Friend as concerned as I am that youth homelessness is one of the largest factors contributing to those figures, due to the benefit cut for 18 to 21-year-olds? Is it not time we reintroduced those benefits?

Layla Moran: Yes, I agree. In fact, joined-up thinking between Departments is a theme that I will return to later in my speech.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that it is important to tackle homelessness before it happens? The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which will come into operation in April—I was proud to sit on the Committee that scrutinised it—will deal with this by alerting services of the risk 56 days before people become homeless, and indeed the Government are providing £73 million to help local authorities tackle this.

Layla Moran: I am indeed getting to that point, at which I will be very generous in my comments.

I am sure that hon. Members are aware of the scale of the problem. How can we not be, when we heard the story of the gentleman who died right on our doorstep in the underpass of Westminster tube station just a few weeks ago? It is clear that the House needs to take this issue much more seriously, and I am sure that many of our constituents would agree.

It is worth repeating some of the key statistics from the Public Accounts Committee’s report. There has been a 134% increase in rough sleeping since 2011. The average life expectancy of a rough sleeper is only 47. People on the street are 17 times more likely to be the victims of violence than those in settled accommodation. Children in long-term temporary accommodation miss far more days of school, at an average of 55 days a year. The country is seeing record problems including record numbers of rough sleepers, and huge increases in the number of families living in temporary accommodation and in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, sometimes for two and a half years at a time. It has never been more important for this House to ensure that the Government are spending enough—and, critically, that they are spending wisely—to address this problem of national significance.

Having looked at the supplementary estimates—dare I say that I have not read them line by line?—it seems that the Ministry proposes an overall reduction of £470 million in its resource budget. I would be grateful if the Minister told us what impact this is likely to have on homelessness. But this is not just about overall spending; it is also about how effectively the money is spent. The Public Accounts Committee has expressed concern over how effectively taxpayers’ money is being used. There have been some welcome developments, including the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Southwark Council, one of the local authorities that serve my constituency, is a trailblazer for the Homelessness Reduction Act and has been much praised by the Minister’s predecessor for its implementation work on the Act and its good prevention work. Within a matter of months, Southwark Council will have to issue redundancy notices to the staff that it has recruited to implement the Homelessness Reduction Act, unless the Government can confirm their ongoing commitment to fund the implementation of the Act. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Homeless Reduction Act, which I and many other Members supported, will be a wasted opportunity to address homelessness unless the Government make that commitment?

Layla Moran: I absolutely agree. Indeed, I will make that point myself later. We need to ensure that the resources are available to make this work.

Local authorities spent £1.1 billion preventing and tackling homelessness in 2015-16, but the Public Accounts Committee found that there were problems: a lack of guidelines on how they should spend the funding they receive and what outcomes they are aiming for. The increase in spending to address homelessness coupled with ongoing cuts to local authority budgets means that councils are struggling to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. Instead, their funding is being spent on tackling homelessness after it has already occurred.

According to the National Audit Office report that underpinned our inquiry, spending on temporary accommodation, which is often poor, has risen from £622 million to £845 million. Meanwhile, countries such as Finland that have prioritised prevention are saving an average of £13,000 a year per homeless person. The key feature is that such countries give homeless people a stable place to stay, where they can rebuild their lives.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the hon. Lady therefore welcome the £28 million investment in the Housing First initiative, which is very much along the lines of the Scandinavian model to which she refers?

Layla Moran: I will, of course. Any money in this area is a good thing, but I do have a concern about the supplementary estimate for 2017-18 that I want to raise with the Minister.

The estimate proposes a reduction in current spending on preventing homelessness, from £265.8 million to £263.6 million. It also proposes to remove £25 million of capital funding previously allocated for reducing homelessness that will now not be spent in 2017-18. Given that the NAO and the Public Accounts Committee
were both clear that there needs to be a focus on preventing homelessness in the first place, these figures are a cause for concern.

I very much welcome the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, as did the whole Committee. Our concern, however, was that far too much sway was put on the Minister for that Act alone to be the panacea. It is not going to work without extra funding available to councils in order to implement it and without funding for truly affordable rents, particularly social rents.

Let me highlight the case of one of my constituents, who lives in a rented house in Abingdon with her two children, one of whom has autism. She recently contacted me because, despite working full time, she cannot afford her rent and is terrified of eviction. She has looked high and low, but cannot find anywhere to live in Abingdon. This story exemplifies the crux of the issue. The report showed that the main driver of the current rise in homelessness is the spiralling rents in the private rented sector. As a nation, how did we get to the stage where a mother in full-time work cannot afford a roof over her head?

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** Surely building more houses can help to reduce homelessness. Does the hon. Lady welcome the £9 billion that the Government have put towards building more affordable and social housing?

**Layla Moran:** I do welcome it, although I worry. As the hon. Gentleman will know, given that his constituency is in Oxfordshire, even something “affordable” in Oxfordshire is not really that affordable when people want to buy. The prices are 80% of market value, but in a grossly inflated market. The key issue is that very little social rented accommodation is being built in our county and across the nation.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Layla Moran:** I have to make some progress. I am sorry, but I am mindful of what Madam Deputy Speaker said.

The estimates show a £259 million reduction in Homes and Communities Agency funding for starter homes and a £72 million reduction this year in affordable homes spending. This worries me. Meanwhile, the estimates show a significant increase in funding for Help to Buy. But those who are about to become homeless are very far from accessing Help to Buy: they have no spare cash, so how are they meant to raise the money for even a small deposit? The estimates also show that capital spend on other housing programmes will fall by £1.2 billion—a reduction of 40%—from £3 billion to £1.8 billion. Help to Buy is useful, but it is certainly not the fix-all solution. The Government have got the emphasis wrong.

Liberal Democrats would like to see a more ambitious programme of house building, but one that aims to be truly affordable—not 80% of market value—and that, critically, also includes rented housing. We have yet to hear from the Government how they are going to achieve that, in the latest Budget or elsewhere.

We also need to consider that people become homeless for a number of other reasons, the most common of which is the end of a private tenancy. Decreasing numbers of houses available for social rent means that local authorities are having to rely on private accommodation providers. This accommodation is often of a poor standard and does not offer value for money. There is a problem with landlords who do not want to accept people in receipt of housing allowance, and we suspect that universal credit will make this situation much worse.

**Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab):**

The hon. Lady is making an incredibly powerful speech, and a lot of personal commitment has clearly been put into addressing this issue. She mentioned universal credit among other policies. Given that this has contributed to the problem, is it one of the policies that she is most embarrassed about her party pursuing while in government with the Conservative party?

**Layla Moran:** I am afraid that that is not what this debate is about; I am going to move on.

The NAO has found that “changes to Local Housing Allowance … are likely to have contributed to the affordability of tenancies for those on benefits, and are an element of the increase in homelessness.”

The key point about joined-up thinking predates any Government. If we are truly to tackle the issue of homelessness, a key recommendation of the Committee’s report is that not only should the money and the provisions of the Homelessness Reduction Act be available, but that we also press Governments to work together.

My last point is that a taskforce from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is meant to be leading this work, yet we were shocked to hear that the previous taskforce met only three times between 2015 and 2017. My understanding is that, as of last week, the new taskforce set up under the Homelessness Reduction Act has not even met once. It is critical that the Government take this matter seriously. Those who are homeless are in dire straits. They deserve not just our compassion and care, but, critically, they need us to find the money to put a roof over their heads. That is the best thing for them and, in the spirit of these estimates day debates, it is the most cost-effective thing to do.

2.20 pm

**Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con):** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). I welcome today’s debate on the estimates of public spending by the Government on homelessness, which is a big challenge across the country. Happily, some great initiatives that aim to improve the current situation are coming up.

First, I acknowledge the £1 billion investment allocated to combating rough sleeping through to 2020. Over the past seven years, there has been an increase in rough sleeping from 2,000 to 4,000, and one root of the problem is mental health issues, which mean that some rough sleepers refuse offers of accommodation. Moreover, many of the rough sleepers in the UK—nearly 60% of the total—are recent arrivals.

To tackle rough sleeping in Northampton, the council has brought together a series of local services and organisations—charities, faith groups, health professionals and advice and support providers—and the police to develop a rough sleepers strategy. “Together we can change lives”, which encourages people to prevent and
reduce rough sleeping in the borough. I take this opportunity to congratulate Northampton’s emergency night shelter for its great work. It opened a year ago and has provided more than 180 homeless people with a temporary shelter.

Rebecca Pow: This very week in Taunton Deane, police are meeting with the chamber of commerce, along with health and housing specialists, to discuss the serious issue of homelessness. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is not just one solution or just one problem? We need to work together in a cross-departmental way.

Andrew Lewer: That is absolutely critical and very much in the spirit of what I am outlining here.

The 94 volunteers in the night shelter have helped 104 of their guests move into settled accommodation; 12 people are currently there. Alongside that is the work of the Northampton Hope Centre, which I visited last year and was most impressed by. Some 36 volunteers as well as local faith groups, Northampton Partnership Homes, S2S, Midland Heart, the county council, SSAFA, the Army, the Hope centre and the council all participated in a borough-wide count of rough sleepers in Northampton on 10 November 2017. All the people found were over 25, and of the 11 people identified 10 were already known to the council’s street outreach team. Of those, five were refusing to engage with local services, four had been provided with accommodation but lost it, as the report indicated, through their own actions. That shows the seriousness of the challenge and some of the complexities of the cases.

The rough sleeping strategy is collaborative—a determined approach to achieve a step change in tackling the reasons why people sleep rough and help those on our streets to turn their lives around. As my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) said, the issue is about working across all partner agencies to provide the right mix of advice, support and practical help to change each person’s life.

I believe that tackling homelessness also means building more houses. I am pleased to point out that since 2010, the Government have increased new housing numbers by 50%.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the only way of providing properly affordable homes is for local councils to build social housing?

Andrew Lewer: That is one part of the mix of a solution. The way forward is through a whole range of options that the Government have been using. I would never under any circumstances say, “This is the one solution to providing houses or tackling homelessness”. As my hon. Friend mentioned earlier, a partnership approach is needed. We need to use all the tools in the toolbox to get on top of the problem.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that councils ought to have their own local plans? They should be in the best place to understand local housing needs.
they would be considered homeless. The Act ought to force local authorities to take proper account of such things.

People are entitled to a proper plan when they go to see an authority. Their expectations about what they need in respect of their jobs, their caring arrangements and the schooling of their children should be taken account of; in many cases, however, local authorities are simply not able to do that because of the shortage of housing. People who are not entitled to priority rehousing must get proper advice. One of the horror stories we heard during evidence was that people were often sent away with a scrap of paper on which there were a few telephone numbers—often out of date—and told, “Go and ring them if you want any help.”

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that single men in particular are given that message—that they are right at the bottom of the queue, and sometimes wasting their time—very early on? They will often end up homeless and on the streets.

Mr Betts: It is single people in that situation—women as well as men. We had evidence from both at our Select Committee inquiry. They are not entitled to priority rehousing from the local authority, but they are entitled to advice, although they were not getting it in all too many cases.

The Government have given an extra sum, between £60 million and £70 million, to help the implementation of the 2017 Act. I do not think that anyone in local government thinks that sufficient. I hope that the Government are open-minded about the issue: it was emphasised over and over again, on a cross-party basis, both by the Select Committee and the Bill Committee, that the money will have to be looked at again. The Act must not fail because of a lack of resources for local authorities to implement it.

As it stands, the Homelessness Reduction Act is likely to reduce not homelessness but its growth. As the NAO report on the estimates highlights, the big growth in homelessness and in the percentage of people presenting as homeless and being accepted is because of section 21 notices being served in the private rented sector and people not being able to afford the rent in that sector; as local housing allowance does not keep pace with rent increases. That is the situation, and it seems that the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, as it is now called, simply have not got their act joined up.

There needs to be an analysis of the effectiveness of constraining local housing allowance and what impact that has on extra spending down the line by local authorities on dealing with the consequences of increased homelessness. That analysis needs to be done if Government are going to justify that position. Something needs to be done urgently.

Another problem is that many homeless people, including single people or people in temporary accommodation, are offered supported housing at some stage. All the evidence, from St Mungo’s and others, has been that the Government’s current proposal of grants being given to local authorities—albeit on a ring-fenced basis initially—to deal with supported housing of less than two years’ duration, which generally applies to people who are homeless, is not going to work. It will not encourage the provision of supported housing or allow existing housing to be maintained. St Mungo’s, the Salvation Army, Home Group and the YMCA have all given evidence to the Government and to my Select Committee to say that that needs to be revisited if we are going to have a proper service and system.

This should not be simply about trying to address the issues of people who become homeless. That is really important. Why have we got a problem? In the end, it is because we have a shortage of housing in this country. I know that the Government have an ambitious target, which I share, to get us to a point where we are building 300,000 new homes a year in this country. However, we are not going to build those new homes unless a very high percentage are built by local authorities and housing associations with Government support. That is the reality.

I welcome the Government giving a £1 billion lift to local authorities by raising the housing cap, but as the Treasury Committee has argued, we need to abolish that cap altogether, and the Government need to sit down with the Local Government Association and look at how we can start delivering social housing that people can afford. What is needed in this country is a major programme. That is needed for the people who cannot afford to buy and cannot afford rents in the private sector, and it is needed to hit the 300,000 target. We will not hit it any other way.

The other great advantage of social house building of that scale is that it is counter-cyclical. We all know that building by private developers will go up and down with the market. At least we can have a degree of certainty in the long term if we plan for a major social house building programme, which will continue through recessions. The Government ought to give serious consideration to that.

Finally, we have to think about the right to buy in areas of acute housing need. It cannot be right to give people a 70% discount to buy homes that are the only ones available for people in acute housing need and people who become homeless. Surely we need a review of the effectiveness of public spending, because that simply cannot be right.

Let us have a look at the discount in areas of acute housing need or at the possibility of suspending the right to buy for a period, with local support. Let us at least look at 100% of the receipts being reinvested in social housing, rather than the percentage of the receipts at present, so that we can deliver back not simply one-for-one replacements—even that is not happening—but like-for-like replacements. A family home being sold off and replaced by an upper maisonette really is not good enough for a homeless family with children who need a home with a garden to live in.

2.33 pm

Gillian Keeghan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and to co-sponsor the debate with the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran).

Homelessness touches every part of the UK, and we in this place need look no further than the entrance to Parliament, where tragically a Portuguese man died just two weeks ago. Figures released this year show an increase in rough sleeping of 16% since 2010, which means that on any one night, more than 4,000 people are sleeping on our streets. While those figures are shocking, they do not show the true scale of the problem.
When we think of homelessness, we imagine people sleeping in doorways or underpasses, or on park benches, but there is another type of homelessness: people living in temporary accommodation. In March last year, an estimated 77,000 families, including 120,000 children, were living without a place to call home. Those are people living in hostels and bed and breakfasts. They are not sleeping on the streets, but they are without a home.

There are countless others whom we do not hear about: the hidden homeless who are without a home and out of sight. I recently met a constituent who is a single mother of three and works part time. Her tenancy agreement ended after her landlady wanted to move back into the house, but when my constituent tried to find another home, she discovered she could not afford anywhere to rent, as the rental market had moved beyond her reach. Chichester District Council offered to put her up in a B&B 20 minutes away but, as a mother, she knew the destabilising effect that would have on her children, and the long distance would make the school run challenging and expensive. Instead, she has had to split her family, with two of her children staying with her mother while she and her youngest are with her grandmother. That decision meant that her children could stay at their respective schools, unlike many others in temporary accommodation, who miss an average of 55 school days. That story is not uncommon, as the termination of private sector tenancy agreements is now the biggest single driver of homelessness.

Successive Governments have failed to build adequate quantities of housing and the right type of housing. The demand-supply ratio has forced up rents and house prices, especially around the south-east. Across England, rents have increased by three times the rate of earnings, and the average rent for a two-bed flat in Chichester is now £944 a month. For many on lower incomes in expensive areas, there is a likelihood of their being priced out of the market and, without family help, becoming homeless.

To tackle that, we know that we need to build more homes. I am pleased that the Government have announced a raft of policies to achieve that and have put house building at the top of their agenda. The multi-pronged approach is the right one, and just one of the measures that are being put in place is a change to planning law so that there are tougher consequences when planned homes are not built. For too long, developers have acquired planning permission and enjoyed watching the value of land increase while failing to lay a single brick.

Of course, investment is key. The £1.5 billion home building fund and £2.7 billion increase to the housing infrastructure fund will go a long way towards ensuring that houses are built in areas where there is great need. I am sure that we all welcome the further investment in the affordable homes programme to the tune of £2 billion, meaning that the programme expenditure will reach £9 billion by 2020-21.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): My hon. Friend is surely right about the importance of a long-term solution and providing more affordable housing, including in our area of West Sussex. Does she agree that there is also an important role for schemes such as emergency hosting for young people who become homeless, which can be provided by volunteers? The brilliant Depaul Nightstop service—I declare an interest, as my partner works for Depaul—provides such a scheme, but in only half the local authorities in England.

Gillian Keegan: I do, and I am familiar with that fantastic scheme. We need to be more innovative to solve this problem. With a large number of people seeking permanent homes, house building measures are a step in the right direction, but building homes takes time, and many people’s needs are urgent, so such schemes are helpful.

The country has faced similar situations throughout its history. In post-war Britain, when the nation was struggling to house its people, my own grandparents, newly married with a baby daughter, found themselves homeless after both had served their country during the war. No facilities for families were available at that time, so their only option was to stay in male-only and female-only hostels while their young daughter—my mum—went into an orphanage. Their plight was resolved when they were offered a prefabricated house to rent. My nan loved her prefab and always talked fondly of her first home. It was not just a house; it was the key to her building a happy family life. I urge the Government and local authorities to think innovatively so that they can provide more social housing in high-price areas for rental quickly.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Lady agree that one area to look at is prefab housing? I know that it got a bad reputation, but it might be the way forward.

Gillian Keegan: I think it is worth looking at. I have looked at some modern homes that have been pre-made in factories, and they are lovely, spacious and very warm—in fact, the one I went into was too warm.

Rough sleepers are among the most vulnerable people in society. We know that they have complex needs. Some are suffering from mental and physical health conditions. That point is highlighted by the fact that rough sleepers are nine times more likely to commit suicide than the general population.

In Chichester, we have a strong community spirit, with people willing to go the extra mile to help one another. As an MP, I have had the privilege of meeting and working with many of these people. Charities such as Stonewall work alongside churches such as St Pancras with the 19 rough sleepers in Chichester, providing them with basic facilities, including washing machines, a warm shower, a meal and a bed for the night. Importantly, they help to build support plans and offer a guided route to help people to get their life back on track. A GP surgery runs a needle exchange programme so that people suffering from addiction can get the right advice and begin to turn their lives around, as they can through the Change, Grow, Live programmes provided by the council.

As I am sure that colleagues are aware, addiction is more prevalent among those who sleep rough. I hope that the Government’s Housing First pilots in the north, which do not have strict preconditions attached to them, are successful, and that this model can be rolled out across the rest of the UK.

[Gillian Keegan]
The Homelessness Reduction Act will provide a shift in the homelessness policy by working on preventive measures. We all agree that prevention is key, and the policy will ensure that everyone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness will be able to get advice and support from their local authority. Chichester District Council has been given £113,400 of extra funding to deliver the changes.

I welcome the Government’s commitment to halve the number of rough sleepers by 2022 and to remove rough sleeping from our society by 2027, as well as their recognition of the complex nature of homelessness, which cannot be tackled by one Department alone. Tonight, however, thousands of people will be on our streets in sub-zero temperatures, while the number of people in temporary accommodation is unsustainable and actually very expensive. We need to find an effective solution, and while the Government’s housing policies will increase the housing stock over time, we need to prioritise more social housing in high-rent areas as, at 30% to 50% of market rents, these are the only truly affordable options for those on modest incomes.

2.41 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to be the third member of the Public Accounts Committee to speak in today’s debate. It would be remiss of me not to mention the speech made by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), who is a member of the Committee, in which she focussed a laser beam on issues of concern to her. I am also delighted to follow the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who is not afraid to go after any Department, and does so without fear or favour.

The problem of homelessness goes much deeper than the 9,000 rough sleepers in this country. As a report published by the Public Accounts Committee clearly outlined at the end of last year, there are over 78,000 households in temporary accommodation, including 120,000 children. Although these tens of thousands have a roof over their heads, they do not have a place to call home. This is a national disgrace, but it is not inevitable.

Solutions will require effective decision making by the Government and the proper targeting of funding. It is all very well for the Government to announce £1 billion to end homelessness, but if that money is wasted and there are overruns, those we seek to help will not get the assistance they need. What is certain when we talk about money is that the solution is not to cut funding assistance they need. What is certain when we talk about money is that the solution is not to cut funding.

All too often, however, we see that the reality is very different, and unrealistic promises have come crashing down under the Public Accounts Committee’s scrutiny once Departments’ plans come into contact with the real world. That is the issue with homelessness: we have all these lofty ideals, but if we are not delivering on them, ultimately the problem will go on and on.

We see from the Public Accounts Committee report that despite the promises of joint working between the former Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions, neither has assessed the impact of changes to the local housing allowance. This is despite clear evidence of the ever-rising cost of private rented accommodation. The availability of affordable accommodation for people on low incomes is dwindling in areas of high inequality, yet little seems to have been done by Departments to tackle this. The report is clear in recommending that the Department should put together and implement a realistic strategy, with specific actions to reduce homelessness. These actions must be backed up with realistic measures to ensure that those actions achieve the right outcome.

Why is a Welsh MP speaking in a debate on homelessness, which is a devolved matter? It is because I want to bring up the example of what we are doing. In Wales, with our Labour-led Welsh Assembly, we have an innovative approach to homelessness under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, which came into force in 2016. Local authorities in Wales have assisted more people, and there has been a reduction in the number of people who remain homeless after seeking help. That has been achieved, among other important changes, by placing a legal duty on local authorities to help to prevent homelessness. I strongly believe that England can and must follow the example set by Wales, and I hope that that will emerge during the passage of the Vagrancy (Repeal) Bill. It is simply not acceptable that families who do not have access to social housing are put in substandard private accommodation.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give us a couple of examples from Wales so that we can understand how Wales has tackled this issue? He has mentioned legislation, but can he give us some examples of the practical implementation of such measures?

Chris Evans: Yes, I can. In my constituency of Islwyn and in Caerphilly, we have the quality home assurance, which is providing top-quality accommodation. We are ensuring that families do not have to stay in bed and breakfasts, and that they are given accommodation as soon as they become homeless. These are small steps, but they are making a large difference to people’s lives in my constituency.

It is not a good situation if people have substandard accommodation, and it is not even a good use of taxpayers’ money. Perhaps the only beneficiaries of such a situation are the unscrupulous landlords who charge extortionate rents for substandard accommodation and get away with it, with the taxpayer footing the bill.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): May I inform my hon. Friend about a converted warehouse in the middle of an industrial estate in my constituency where four London boroughs are placing families?
We estimate that the landlord of that premises gains between £1.2 million and £1.5 million of taxpayers’ money each year.

**Chris Evans:** Sadly, that is not an isolated case. There are a number of cases, especially in south-east England—I know some Members in the Chamber represent that area—of unscrupulous landlords cashing in on the misery and misfortune of homeless families. Something needs to be done by the Government, and we need to come down on these people like a ton of bricks.

The rapid increase in the number of rough sleepers and those in temporary accommodation strongly suggests that the Government’s approach to tackling homelessness is failing. Clearly there is a need for radical thinking on this matter, in line with the example set by Wales, that goes beyond undoubtedly well-meaning but ultimately vague and unrealistic promises.

The local housing allowance appears to be unfit for purpose in supporting families into private rented accommodation. Something should be done about the level of the local housing allowance or the cost of private rents—or both. Even more than concrete action on the LHA and the cost of rented accommodation, it would clearly make sense to increase the supply of social housing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said.

It is well known that there is a severe housing shortfall in this country. It seems that relying on private developers to build the necessary units of housing is another Government strategy that is failing. Perhaps it is time for the Department to consider expanding the delivery of new units of social housing and ensuring that social housing remains under the ownership of local authorities. While I think that we can all agree that people should be able to own their own home, we can ensure value for taxpayers’ money only if social housing is not constantly sold off to the private sector.

While this is merely the tip of the iceberg in addressing the causes of homelessness, such measures would at the very least represent an important step forward in reducing the numbers of people who find themselves without a home. We have heard it many times in this place and elsewhere, but I will say it again: we live in one of the richest countries in the world, but it is clear that rising inequality has created a divided nation between the haves and the have-nots. It is almost like there are two countries, and this is expressed clearly and harshly in the number of homeless people. We can and we must act to reduce the extent of homelessness in this country. It is our duty to those people and to the 120,000-plus children living in temporary accommodation. Their families are suffering; they need our help now.

2.50 pm

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans).

There is no inevitability about homelessness. In 21st-century Britain, there is no reason for anybody to sleep rough on our streets. It is perhaps too easy to walk past a rough sleeper and pretend that they are not there, and to think that the individual before us must have done something wrong—that they are a drug addict or alcoholic, someone to be fearful of and stay away from. We must break this taboo. Every rough sleeper is somebody’s son or daughter and every or any single one of us could be in that position within a small number of unfortunate life events. We must never forget that.

It cannot be said enough that one person sleeping rough on our streets is one person too many. In last year’s autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced £28 million of funding for three Housing First pilots in Manchester, Liverpool and the west midlands. That was such an important move, because the underlying causes of homelessness, and, in particular, rough sleeping, are incredibly complex. To suggest that they are attributable to any single cause is to display an unwillingness truly to understand the issue.

The more we can learn about what forces people on to our streets, the better we can target preventive support, yet there are some things that we do know. If we look at the 2016-17 Combined Homelessness and Information Network figures for London, we can see that among those who were interviewed the single biggest reason given by new rough sleepers for leaving their previous accommodation was the loss of a tenancy, yet that was not because they were evicted for antisocial behaviour or rent arrears. Individuals were asked to leave, most likely through section 21 notices from their landlords. The second biggest reason was relationship breakdown, which is not all that unexpected given that young single men are rarely considered a priority need unless they are vulnerable. We need to consider both issues to see how rough sleeping can be prevented, but it is more important to ensure that there are support services in place for those already sleeping rough on our streets.

The CHAIN report found that 47% of the rough sleepers that the network spoke to had mental health support needs, 44% had alcohol support needs and 35% had drug support needs. That underlines the problem in trying to tackle this issue: rough sleeping is not simply a homelessness problem. All too often we hear stories of individuals who have been helped off the streets and into temporary accommodation but who do not get the support they need to address the root causes so, unfortunately, they end up back on the streets.

Addiction can also affect people’s ability to enter emergency accommodation. In my experience, those sleeping rough on our streets cannot stay at the local night shelter or hostel because they have an alcohol or drug addiction. That is why Housing First is so important. We need to get vulnerable people off the streets and into stable accommodation so that we can help them with their underlying support needs.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** We do not have to go too far from here—just down to Victoria—to see people living rough on the streets. I often wonder why nothing has been done about them, and I see them regularly down there. There is another factor too. Homeless families have been exploited by landlords and are in overcrowded accommodation, and some of them are evicted because they cannot afford to pay the rents, so we should think about building council housing for a change as well.

**Will Quince:** The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I want specifically to talk about rough sleeping, and he raises a point about wider homelessness. I have no doubt that colleagues across the Chamber will speak

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*[Siobhain McDonagh]*

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**Mr Jim Cunningham:** We do not have to go too far from here—just down to Victoria—to see people living rough on the streets. I often wonder why nothing has been done about them, and I see them regularly down there. There is another factor too. Homeless families have been exploited by landlords and are in overcrowded accommodation, and some of them are evicted because they cannot afford to pay the rents, so we should think about building council housing for a change as well.

**Will Quince:** The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I want specifically to talk about rough sleeping, and he raises a point about wider homelessness. I have no doubt that colleagues across the Chamber will speak
more widely about homelessness, but I want to talk about rough sleeping, which does not necessarily fall into the category of families. It tends predominantly to involve young single men and young single women.

We do not have to look too widely across the world to see that Housing First is working and helping rough sleepers with the most complex needs.

**Helen Hayes:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about Housing First, in that it is a well-proven approach to addressing the complex needs of rough sleepers. Does he therefore agree that three pilot schemes, none of them in London, represent a paltry approach from this Government to a practice that we know works and that should be funded to address this urgent crisis?

**Will Quince:** The hon. Lady, with whom I worked on the Homelessness Reduction Act, makes a good point. If she bears with me, she might like what I will have to say in just a few moments.

In my view, the Housing First approach is a common-sense approach. Think about it: how can we provide the support services needed to help rough sleepers with their mental health, drug or alcohol issues when the support workers never know from day to day where they can find those individuals? How do we address the general and mental health problems that are all too common with rough sleepers when they are under extraordinary pressure and physical strain from living on the streets?

Like the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), I am pleased the Government have launched the pilots, but I think that it is time to go further and faster. I believe that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government wants to go further. He is committed to tackling the issue and is determined that the Government will halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it entirely by 2027. But I want him to be bold and radical. If this was the first time that such a project had been undertaken, I would understand being hesitant about moving faster and the desire to evaluate how the pilots work, but they already exist in the UK and are used across the world. We should implement Housing First across the country as a priority. At the very least—and I look to the Minister on this—let us have a timetable for the full roll-out of Housing First programmes across England.

Most importantly, we must ensure that the programmes are fully linked up with local support services that are given the funding they need to help those sleeping rough with their mental health problems or addictions. Of course, that will involve spending money, but in my view that is a short-term cost. The study by the University of York and the Centre for Housing Policy found that Housing First programmes cost between £26 and £40 an hour, yet the potential savings are estimated to be as high as £15,000 per person per year if we include reductions in use across the NHS and in our police and courts services. So this is not only the right thing to do, but will save the taxpayer money.

Homelessness and rough sleeping in particular often have many complex underlying issues, which means that addressing them will require more than one solution. The Government have already made good progress on tackling homelessness, whether through the Homelessness Reduction Act—it was a privilege to serve on the Bill Committee, and I am delighted that it has become an Act of Parliament and will be implemented in April—

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Will Quince:** Of course.

**Giles Watling:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. As a student, I studied sociology and I spent some time on the streets and at St Martin-in-the-Fields at the Crypt. I know that people went through a lot of hard times down there, and that was many years ago—decades and decades ago. This problem has been with us for such a long time but what we must do is think outside the box and always be flexible. Housing First is a great and a wonderful project, but we must go further and we must always look at these people, communicate with them and ask them why they are there. It is not always just about mental health or family breakdown. There are many reasons, but we must keep the line of communication open.

**Will Quince:** Thank you my hon. Friend for that intervention, which has taken up a fair chunk of my remaining time—but nevertheless I thank him for it. We need to stop thinking of rough sleeping as simply a homelessness problem and, by rolling out Housing First programmes across England, linking them with support services and giving them the funding they need, we have the opportunity to transform the lives of the people sleeping rough on our streets. My hon. Friend is right that we need to think outside the box. I think that to a large extent Housing First is the answer, but we must roll it out faster and further. I know that the Secretary of State wants to do this, so I say to the Minister: let this be the Government that end rough sleeping for good.

2.58 pm

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I speak as co-chair of the all-party group for ending homelessness, which I am pleased to co-chair with the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). I work with him to highlight solutions in a non-partisan way. Doing so takes awareness of the policies contributing to the problem as well as ability to identify the policies that are missing altogether. It also takes an admission that Ministers try very hard to avoid: homelessness has risen every year since 2010. This year-on-year growth is avoidable and appalling. In 2005, the numbers of people rough sleeping across the whole of England were 459. It is now estimated that 8,000 people slept rough in London alone last year. Shelter estimates that more than 300,000 people were in temporary accommodation last year, including, as we have heard, 120,000 children who woke up on Christmas day in often unsuitable places, perhaps sharing a bathroom or kitchen with strangers. That growth is a direct result of Government policies since 2010. When Ministers axed national funding for genuinely affordable homes and brutally slashed council funding, including £200 million from my borough of Southwark, it is hard to deny the impact.

When our safety net of the social security system is picked apart, leaving disadvantaged people with no income at all in too many cases, especially under universal
credit delays, it is inevitable that homelessness will rise. When mental health services are eradicated, Ministers cannot pretend not to know that 40% of homeless people have mental health conditions. When Ministers undermine supported housing for people with mental health conditions and other vulnerable groups, the problem will only grow. When drug and alcohol cessation services are decimated, it is simply deceitful to pretend it will not contribute to a rise in homelessness and costs to the NHS, as people end up admitted to A&E in crisis.

Costs are rising. Southwark Council spent £3 million tackling homelessness last year, on up-front help to prevent people from losing homes and to tackle rough sleeping. But still in my surgery sessions I see the problem every week. I have seen a 65-year-old cleaner sleeping on night buses, in work but carrying as many of her belongings with her as she could carry. I have seen a 19-year-old woman sleeping with different men every night rather than go back on the streets. I have seen a working family with three children under 10 wrongly denied the right to continue working in this country by the Home Office and put on the streets by a private landlord until a local church stepped in.

As in so many other areas where the Government have abdicated their responsibilities, we see people and charities stepping in. I would like to thank the staff and all volunteers providing crucial support and services across our country, but in particular in my community. We have seen massive growth in visible rough sleeping around Elephant and Castle and London Bridge, and temporary accommodation in Southwark is simply exhausted. I have been trying to help the Robes Project over a number of years. I have slept outside Southwark cathedral three times—please do sponsor me this year—in winter to raise awareness and funds for its work in providing accommodation and food in 28 churches every winter, opening its doors in November. It relies on volunteers to provide that accommodation and food. It does an incredible job.

In recess, I spent a very cold evening with St Mungo’s outreach team on its StreetLink work. Anyone can refer a rough sleeper to StreetLink online, through their app, or on the phone 24 hours a day. Sadiq Khan has advertised StreetLink and since December, Londoners have referred over 2,000 homeless people using this service—double that at the same period last year. I think that demonstrates a public will to tackle the problem that is simply not matched by Government action. It is because of St Mungo’s amazing staff and volunteers like Eamon, Darren and Dave, who I met on that cold Monday evening in recess, that desperate people are getting the help they need in this extreme weather.

The cold weather is not the only reason people are more concerned about the issue currently. Just two weeks ago a homeless man died on our doorstep here at Westminster—a shocking case, but sadly not isolated. Just weeks earlier and within a mile of this place, another man died on the streets of our capital. Deaths of homeless people have been recorded from Edinburgh to Birmingham in the past couple of months alone.

Ministers have twiddled their thumbs, ignored the problem and passed the buck for far too long. There are clear policies to help: building more homes and supporting councils to build more, as well as lifting the local housing allowance freeze; intervening in the failing private sector to cap rents and provide secure, longer tenancies, in particular for families struggling the services we know help in mental health, and in drug and alcohol cessation; ending delays and cuts to disadvantaged people, from universal credit to the personal independence payment and the employment and support allowance; and backing a rent deposit scheme, as advocated by Crisis.

One of the lowlights of the 2010 election was the “Broken Britain” slogan. Little did we know that the Cameron soundbite was a destination, not a description. Nothing highlights how badly broken our country is more than people freezing to death on our streets in the face of, and as a direct consequence of, a cold-hearted Government ignoring what worked, denying culpability, and refusing to fund and implement sufficient viable solutions today.

3.3 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Reducing homelessness across the UK has to be a huge priority and I welcome the work the Government are doing to move forward. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 will ensure that all English local authorities, public services and the third sector work together more effectively to prevent homelessness. The Act, which comes into effect in April, will also help the Government to meet their aim of eliminating rough sleeping by 2027.

I am delighted with the efforts to bring local services and providers together. I spent much of the autumn in my constituency examining our local homelessness services, holding a number of summits with different groups from the public sector, charities and business, and bringing along the then Minister with responsibility for homelessness and the Home Secretary to meet them. From those discussions, it was abundantly clear that drawing up invisible barriers between services, and being protectionist about priorities and funding cuts, does nothing to improve the support available to people either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. I am pleased that Ministers have committed over £1 billion to tackle homelessness through to 2020, with money going directly to local authorities, as well as to centrally funded homelessness programmes. In particular, the pilot studies that will look at new ways to combat this issue are very welcome. I hope the Government will learn those lessons and roll out the successful aspects of those schemes sooner rather than later.

In Mansfield, the number of people classified as homeless and in priority need has actually fallen since 2012. I am pleased to note that the numbers registered as living in temporary accommodation has fallen, too. That is down to a number of factors, including the good work done by the local authority and by Framework, which provides commissioned services, including an amazing outreach programme. It is heart-wrenching to hear about the lives and stories of some of the people using its service. When I went out with Framework’s outreach team at 6 am on a cold autumn morning, I met a number of Mansfield’s homeless people. The striking thing is that so many are in that position through no fault of their own. One in particular struck a chord with me: a young man who had been injected with class A drugs by his mother while still at primary school. The truth is that he never had a chance. The outreach service
is working with him and others to help them get on their feet. The key thing about the work done by Framework is that it recognises that while the housing aspect is obviously a huge factor in tackling homelessness, equally important is access to support services around mental health, drugs and alcohol, and a complex variety of needs. It is telling that many of Mansfield’s entrenched homeless have been given housing in the past, but have been unable to keep it for a variety of complex reasons.

It is concerning that despite the positive figures since 2012—as I said, the number of homeless people has actually fallen by about a third—in the past year it has started to creep up again. Far from the simplistic image that is sometimes painted of homelessness, where many people talk about the lack of available housing—it is hugely important, yes, and prevalent in London and other areas where the cost of housing is extortionate—in my view it is not the key issue in Mansfield. The causes of rough sleeping are incredibly complex. Individual circumstances can be driven by mental health issues, addiction, family breakdown and so on. That is why it is so important that local services, including both health and housing departments, offer a co-ordinated approach. In Mansfield we have a strong network, including charities such as the Beacon Project which are committed not just to offering food and a shower but prioritising getting everybody access to key services.

When we talk about homeless people, we often think of rough sleepers first. However, as many hon. Members have already said, many fall into the hidden homeless category. Many people are sofa-surfing with friends and family, without a home to call their own. Young people, in particular, can struggle with the up-front costs of renting, and landlords see them as a risky proposition. That is why last year I supported the Crisis Help to Rent campaign, looking for additional funding for local projects aimed at helping homeless people into renting.

One point that is clear from the discussions I have had locally and with Ministers is that low-level ongoing support can make a huge difference to people’s lives, helping them to not just gain but maintain a tenancy for the long term. As my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) said, support in managing mental health issues, addiction, financial management, learning difficulties and sometimes even just a regular conversation with a trusted friend can be the difference between leading a relatively normal life and a life on the streets.

In Mansfield, we have some fantastic supported housing associations that help to get people back on their feet. They would love to be able to offer that ongoing support too to the people who rely on them, but they struggle to access the funding to do that. Often, in my experience, they do it anyway through their own dedication and at their own cost, but they would benefit hugely from more support. I was pleased to see an additional £250,000 come forward for Mansfield over three years, through the flexible homelessness support grant, to support the local authority in boosting some of these services.

As I said in my first sentence, homelessness clearly needs to be addressed as a priority and it is important that funding reflects that. I welcome the Government’s determination to end rough sleeping and to cut the number of homeless people, and the multiple measures, pilot schemes and changes that have come forward already. The Homelessness Reduction Act is a big step forward and I hope to see the Housing First pilot expanded quickly. One thing that is often overlooked is that prevention is far better than cure, and this needs to be clearly built in to the Government’s plans if they are to meet their commitment. We must ensure that tackling homelessness remains a central priority and that Government funding levels reflect its importance, not just in terms of housing but, vitally, for the support services that come with it.

3.9 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is nothing short of a national disgrace that in 2018 in the United Kingdom, one of the richest countries in the world, there are people left with no alternative but to sleep on the streets. This disgrace was brought sharply into focus by the recent death of a rough sleeper in Westminster tube station, not a stone’s throw from this place. My own city of Birmingham was ranked 14th in England last year for people sleeping rough, an increase from the previous year. A recent Public Accounts Committee report found that there are more than 9,000 rough sleepers in England. That is 9,000 people who have nowhere to feel safe; 9,000 people with nowhere to live rather than simply exist; 9,000 people with nowhere to be at peace.

Although rough sleepers are the public face of homelessness, the problem permeates far deeper in our society. The total number of people who are classed as homeless under the law, including single people in hostels and those in temporary accommodation, is truly shocking, with some 78,000 families in England, including 120,000 children, currently living in temporary accommodation. There has been a rise of roughly 29,000 since 2011. Shelter calculated that this equates roughly to 307,000 people recorded as homeless across Britain.

Homelessness is costing local authorities around £1.15 billion, £845 million of which is spent on temporary living costs. The National Audit Office recently concluded that Ministers have no grip on the causes or costs of rising homelessness and have shown no inclination to grasp how the problem has been fuelled in part by housing benefit cuts. It concluded that the Government’s attempts to address homelessness since 2011 have failed to deliver value for money. Recent research carried out by Crisis showed that there will be significant costs to future Governments if policies remain the same, and that investment in homelessness prevention and rapid response is much more cost-effective.

Homelessness often results from a combination of events, such as relationship breakdown, debt, adverse experiences in childhood and ill health. A recent audit found that 41% of homeless people reported a long-term physical health problem and 45% had a diagnosed mental health problem, compared with 28% and 25% respectively in the general population. Issues such as depression, alcohol or drug abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder often contribute to homelessness and are exhibited by those who are homeless. For our already over-stretched and under-resourced mental health services, these hard-to-reach individuals pose a serious and complex challenge.

Labour provided 2 million more homes, enabled 1 million more people to be homeowners and provided the largest investment in social housing in a generation. Under Labour, homelessness fell by roughly three quarters
between 1998 and 2009 to record low levels. This Government cannot escape the fact that because of their policies, we have seen a steep drop in investment for affordable homes, crude cuts to housing benefit, reduced funding for homelessness services and a lack of action to help private renters.

Labour is committed to establishing a Prime Minister-led taskforce on ending rough sleeping and tackling homelessness, making links between housing, health, social security and work. The fact this work would be led by the Prime Minister demonstrates the importance to Labour of ending the tragedy and national shame of social security and work. The fact this work would be led by the Prime Minister demonstrates the importance to Labour of ending the tragedy and national shame of homelessness in this country. I hope that the Government will treat this issue with the seriousness and tenacity that it deserves.

3.13 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for beginning this important debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) for co-sponsoring it. As we gather here, the beast from the east is making its presence felt. Conditions serve as a timely reminder that when the weather is harsh, many people find themselves out on the streets and without a warm home. Today of all days, I am conscious of how the weather affects those who are homeless. In my constituency, temperatures are set to drop below minus 4º overnight. It is vital that we help people who may be rough sleeping.

My borough of Stockport has changed the way that it provides emergency shelter in cold weather. Help will now be available to rough sleepers one night after temperatures drop below zero. That is over and above the legal requirement to provide enhanced support after only three nights of sub-zero temperatures, and I am encouraged to see emergency accommodation with beds and showers opening earlier. This week’s severe weather is a reminder to us all of the conditions too many people have to survive in without a roof over their heads.

Charities and shelters do incredible work over the winter months to support those who find themselves on the streets. Last week, I had the opportunity to witness at first hand the great effort undertaken by one of our charities to help the most vulnerable. Human Appeal is an Islamic faith-based charity in Cheadle that engages in humanitarian work at home and abroad—it works not only in 25 countries across the world, but in the UK. It recently provided assistance following the Manchester bombing last year, and it raised £94,000 for victims of the Grenfell fire tragedy. Every November, Human Appeal runs the “Wrap Up Manchester” campaign, collecting coats and warm clothes for distribution to rough sleepers and the homeless on the streets of Manchester.

Charities such as Human Appeal demonstrate the vital work that grassroots campaigns can contribute, in addition to the initiatives instigated by the Government. If we are truly serious about eradicating homelessness, we must be ambitious in our actions and help people into homes and put a roof over their heads. I welcome last year’s autumn Budget announcement of £28 million of funding to pilot a Housing First approach to address this very issue. Three major regions will roll out the pilots, and my region of Greater Manchester will benefit from £1.8 million from that funding pot.

This is an issue that people really care about. Greater Manchester’s bid to end rough sleeping by 2020 has attracted support from local business and benefactors. Working together with charities and members of the public, they have raised more than £135,000 for this mayoral homeless fund initiative. Along with the £1.8 million from central Government, that will go a long way in combating rough sleeping in the city region. As part of the Manchester pilot, 15 housing associations and two private rented sector landlords have come together to form the Greater Manchester homes partnership and provide 270 homes for entrenched rough sleepers over a three-year period. The councils have also agreed to give homeless people free access to the documents that they need to secure housing, such as birth certificates. The pilots will support some of the most entrenched rough sleepers off the streets and help them back into a home that will provide stability in their lives. That will help them to recover from complex health issues, such as mental health difficulties, and help sustain their tenancies. It is really important to have that wraparound support.

I am a great believer in learning from our friends and neighbours, so I will turn to Finland for an example. The Finnish Housing First initiative was introduced in 2007 and permanent housing, based on a normal lease, was seen as a fundamental solution for each homeless person. Over the 10 years since its inception, hostels have been converted into supported housing units with independent flats for tenants. Finland has all but eradicated rough sleeping. If Finland can do it, we can too.

I extend my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for introducing the Homelessness Reduction Act, which will be implemented fully in April. It has been a privilege to serve on the Select Committee with him to scrutinise and bring this legislation forward. I welcome that action and the Government initiatives to drive this forward and eradicate homelessness.

3.19 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) and all those who have spoken so far have made passionate speeches, showing how they care about homelessness in their constituency. I hope, therefore, that if my Homelessness
(End of Life Care) Bill gets a Second Reading, they will be there to support it. I share their passion, but I want to make a boring speech. I want to speak about the estimates that are before us today—this is an estimates debate. The reason is—to make a serious point—that the House does not do its job properly, and has not done so for decades, because it does not hold the Government to account for their draft budgets and how they spend taxpayers’ money. This Parliament talks about parliamentary sovereignty all the time; I wish we had some, but until this Parliament stands up to the Executive and plays its role in analysing how the money is spent, we will not have anything like parliamentary sovereignty, Brexit or no Brexit.

I make that point with respect to homelessness because there cannot be many other issues on which it is as important that the House get to grips with the money. To illustrate that point, I refer hon. Members to the estimates, which I am sure they looked at ahead of this debate, including the central Government supply estimates published last April, which are the subject of this debate. Nothing in the many tables and figures in the section on the Department for Communities and Local Government, as it was then, talks about homelessness; they are all in very broad aggregate totals that tell us nothing. This is completely unnecessary. Other Parliaments, including the New Zealand and Swedish Parliaments, are given detailed information on spending. They get to deal with the figures and so make real decisions on how the money is spent. We do not, and that is shocking.

Chris Evans: I seek the right hon. Gentleman’s advice. He was a Minister for five years. Was this his experience of the Department he ran?

Sir Edward Davey: Yes, it was indeed, and when the Cabinet debated ways to improve for money, I made the same argument. The then Prime Minister was interested and asked the Cabinet Secretary to pursue it, but unfortunately, after several meetings, it was blocked by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer.

I move now from the main supply estimates to the supplementary supply estimates, which—a gain—I am sure others have read in detail. These are a little more illuminating and come with a proper memorandum. Hon. Members might be interested to know that they reduce the amount of money for homelessness. It might be for a good reason—I do not know—but it talks about a £9 million reduction in the flexible homelessness support grant. Apparently a new procurement strategy and vehicle is being set up that means the money cannot be spent. I am sure that that £9 million could have been spent on homeless people. It also talks about removing £16 million from the Move On fund—it could not be spent in-year and so apparently has to be spent later on in this Parliament. That is another £16 million not being spent on homelessness. Perhaps the Minister, who I am sure has been briefed for this debate, can tell us why £25 million has been lost from the homelessness budget this fiscal year. If we are to get to grips with this, we have to get to grips with the money.

Jamie Stone: Does my right hon. Friend agree that something could be learned from the close scrutiny the Scottish Parliament gives to these figures? That might be instructive for this place.

Sir Edward Davey: I agree with my hon. Friend. One advantage of devolution is that we can experiment with new ways of doing things, one of which might be better scrutiny of the money.

I am a bit of a geek on this. I wrote a pamphlet about 15 years ago on it. I did some research and found that the last time the House voted down a request from the Government was 1919, which shows that the House has basically given up its role in scrutinising the Budget properly. When one asks for more information, one ends up going to the National Audit Office, which does some decent work on the figures to help the Public Accounts Committee, which is behind the report we are debating now. I refer hon. Members to the NAO report on homelessness published last September, which shows the full extent of the problem. It shows that local authorities spent £1.148 billion on homelessness in 2015-16—the last year we have figures for—of which £845 million was spent on temporary accommodation and £303 million on prevention, support and advice. There is little detail beyond those big aggregate figures, which do not tell us much about how the money was spent.

The commentary in the Auditor General’s report is instructive. Paragraph 128 states: “Local authorities fund the cost of homelessness from a number of different sources... The Department does not know how much of each source of funding is used for each component of homelessness services. Without this information, it cannot fully understand the impact that reducing one source of funding will have on the others...the Department does not have the information it needs to predict where a cut in funding will limit a local authority’s ability to meet its duties.”

What does that mean? The Department does not know. We are not told. Who does know? Who knows where this money is being spent and whether it is being spent in the best way possible? It is time we got our Parliament up to scratch. Then we can talk about parliamentary sovereignty.

I turn to others parts of the NAO report, which we paid for—it is an expensive and detailed report and we ought to read it properly. It is provided to the House free for Members. I refer them to paragraph 24, which is headed, “Conclusions on Value for Money”. It says: “The Department’s recent performance in reducing homelessness therefore cannot be considered value for money.”

We need to get to grips with this. The money we are spending is probably not enough and the way we are spending it is not very good. We will not tackle this problem until we sort ourselves out.

The only thing we can find is the trends, and the trends are worrying. We have been spending more in recent years on dealing with the symptoms of the problem—temporary accommodation—but less on prevention. It is great that we have the Homelessness Prevention Act—a brilliant piece of legislation—but we are spending less on prevention, which is not what Parliament wants. Homelessness is a scar on our society. We in this place are elected to do our job properly, to scrutinise the money and tackle this problem. Until we sort out our processes on things such as public expenditure scrutiny, we will never do that job properly.

3.27 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: I am a vice president of the Local
Government Association, have a small property portfolio and was the sponsor of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, of which I am very proud.

I thank the previous speaker, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), for bringing us back to the key issue, which is how the money is spent on the things we care about. As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) alluded to, homelessness comes in many guises, but there are three predominant categories. The first are the people we see on our streets: the rough sleepers. The estimates vary, but between 4,000 and 9,000 people at any one time are sleeping rough on our streets. As has already been said, imagine what that must be like in weather such as this. It is a national scandal that a single individual in this country should be sleeping rough on our streets in this day and age.

Secondly, we have the temporary accommodation. Nearly 80,000 households and 120,000 children are in temporary accommodation, without a settled home. Probably even more important is the fact that 300,000 people are estimated to be sofa-surfing, staying with friends, or otherwise homeless.

We know that the causes of homelessness are varied. The predominant reason is the end of an assured shorthold tenancy, but there are other aspects such as relationship breakdown, unemployment, injury, sickness and, to a small extent, the welfare reductions that the Government have made. What we can say—and what is clear to me from the work that I have done with homeless people—is that every single homeless person is a unique case who will need careful treatment and assistance to return to a stable footing.

In 1977, for the first time, a Government legislated to impose duties in respect of homelessness and to prevent it from happening in this country. We look back on that now and wonder why no one had done it before, and I hope that in years to come people will look back on 2018 and say what a scandal it was that single homeless people were not assisted. At present, if families are threatened with homelessness and go to the local authority, they will be told—even today—to come back when they have been evicted. The crisis then occurs when they have been evicted: they go to the local housing office and are triaged, and if they are lucky they will be put in bed-and-breakfast or temporary accommodation, but they will not be given a new house. A single person will be told, “Go and sleep in a shop doorway or on a park bench, and if you are lucky you will be picked up by one of the charities under the No Second Night Out initiative. That is a scandal that we have to end.

I am delighted that on 3 April, this will all change once and for all. There will be a change of culture in our local authorities, and a change of culture in the way in which we treat homeless people. They will be able to go to the local authority 56 days before they are made homeless; they will then be sat down and a plan will be produced. Prevention is obviously better than cure, and I am also delighted that the Government have stumped up a total of £83 million towards implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act, which I piloted. However, my first ask of the Minister is “Please keep the money under review.” We cannot allow circumstances to arise in which it runs out and local authorities do not deliver on their responsibility.

The 180 pages of guidance on implementing the Act that have been given to local authorities demonstrate the complexity of the change that we have made. The guidance issues a warning to authorities that there is a hook in the Act: if they do not change their culture a code of practice will be imposed, and they will be forced to act.

I note from what was said earlier by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon that the homelessness reduction taskforce has yet to meet. Will my hon. Friend the Minister—whom I congratulate on her appointment—update the House on when it will meet, and what its programme of action will be?

I am delighted that we have implemented the initial Housing First pilots. As other Members have pointed out, Housing First is a key way of assisting people who are sleeping rough. They are likely to be suffering from mental or physical health problems, drug or alcohol addictions or substance abuse, and they need a package of help. How long will the pilots last, and how quickly can we scale them up so that the whole country can benefit from them?

Finally, there is the issue of how we can assist people in the future. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), I lobbied for Help to Rent funding. I am delighted that the Chancellor allocated £20 million towards the project, but that is not enough. We need more, so that people who are hard pressed and cannot raise a deposit can find somewhere to live. In the long term the answer is longer tenancies, more housing and reducing the cost of temporary accommodation, but I commend my hon. Friend the Minister, and ask her to answer some of those questions when she winds up the debate.

3.33 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): It is an honour to take part in the debate initiated by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), and, indeed, to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), but it is important for us to remember when we are in this place that the power of Parliament is not just the power to debate. People do not care how much we know about the issues that affect their lives until they know how much we care, and that will be evidenced in our action. Those whom we are here to represent must always be at the forefront of what we say and do here, because otherwise we risk becoming a bureaucracy that is void of compassion. That is why action to increase funding must be taken.

My constituency is ranked 46th on Shelter’s list relating to people who are in temporary accommodation or sleeping rough. Every week, I meet people who do not have a place that they can call home. In fact, many of my constituents are unable to acquire and maintain regular, safe, secure and adequate housing. We have also heard about the homeless gentleman who passed away in Westminster station. Homelessness is not an aspiration. When we were younger and we thought about what we would like to do when we were older, becoming homeless and finding a piece of cardboard to sleep on in a shop entrance would not have come into the equation.


Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Lady is making an excellent point. Does she agree that the fact that the Housing Act 1996 describes people as “becoming homeless intentionally” is quite outrageous and offensive? Is not that the exact point that she is making?

Fiona Onasanya: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I absolutely agree with him. I should also put on record that I was a commercial property solicitor before coming to this place. No one becomes homeless intentionally. I know that that Act looks at whether someone has taken steps to put themselves in a particular position, but no one takes steps to make themselves homeless. Someone could lose their job, for example, and be two months behind with their mortgage, or they could get into arrears with their rent and have their accommodation reposessed. Did they deliberately not pay their rent? No, there were factors that meant they did not have the funds to do so. I absolutely agree that no one is intentionally homeless.

Being or becoming homeless is an unintended consequence of many factors, and we are not doing enough to address that. Over £7 billion of cuts have been made to housing benefit support since 2010, with 13 separate cuts to housing benefit over the past eight years, including the bedroom tax and breaking the link between housing benefit for private renters—local housing allowance—and private rents. I believe that the 169% increase in rough sleepers since 2010 is a direct result of decisions made by Ministers in this place to reduce funding for homelessness services, and of a lack of action to help private renters.

The issue of homelessness has not been adequately funded, and there has been a steep drop in investment. I understand that the Government are looking at being fiscally minded, as the hon. Member for Harrow East said, and paying attention to what they are spending, but we seriously need to invest to save in this regard. This is the sixth richest country in the world, and we cannot have people sleeping on doorsteps who are unable to look after themselves and who have nowhere to call home. We cannot have people who are sleeping on sofas falling through the gaps because they are not considered homeless. That is unacceptable. We have a chance here to make a difference and to do something. We have a chance to invest in lives, because we are here to serve people. If we forget that, we have forgotten who we really are.

3.38 pm

Alex Burchart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I have been looking at homelessness and its associated problems for a number of years. For four years, I was director of policy at the Centre for Social Justice, which looks at the root causes of poverty in the UK. We specialised in looking at long-term worklessness, addiction, educational failure, serious personal debt and the like. One of the things we discovered when looking at those problems, each of which can cause subsequent problems and hold people back, was that even when people had a lot else that was going right in their life, those other points of stability were undermined if they did not have a stable home.

That is one of the reasons why it has been so depressing to see homelessness creeping up. We know that the problem has a number of root causes, and it is good to see the Government starting to get to grips with them. First, there is an over-inflated housing market in parts of our country. The price of property, particularly for rental, is simply too high. As Members on both sides of the House have said, this has led to instances of young families who are in work finding that they cannot afford to get themselves back into the rental market when they fall out. People who are doing all the right things find themselves trapped outside the rental market for want of an up-front payment. Also, house prices are far too high in certain centres of population.

All that is why it is so important that the Government continue their major investment in home building. The £44 billion announced by the Chancellor in last year’s Budget will go a long way towards solving the long-term supply problem in our housing market. I am very proud that the Government have set themselves the excellent ambition of getting 300,000 new homes a year built. We must get on top of that as quickly as possible, and it is very good that the start-up figures show we are moving in that direction.

There are also more complex problems that lead to people falling out of even temporary accommodation and on to the streets. These are problems of mental health, addiction and entrenched issues that are not always dealt with in a timely fashion. That is why we need to back the pilots the Government are putting money into. Housing First was championed in a report by the Centre for Social Justice—it was after I left; I cannot take any credit for it. It showed that when such a policy had been implemented in Belgium, Finland and parts of the USA, meaning that housing accommodation was given to people first—rather than treatment first, which is still the predominant model—it gave homeless people the base that they need if treatment is to work. It gave them stable foundations so that they could fix the other problems in their lives and stay off the street permanently. That has to be the right approach. We need to create an environment that makes it possible for people to overcome complex mental health problems and complex problems of addiction. The street is simply not the right environment in which to do that, and I would go so far as to say that many of our current hostels and places of supported housing are also not the right environment. We need a much more secure base for those most vulnerable people.

The housing first initiative in Finland, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) mentioned, has led to a dramatic reduction in the number of people who are homeless or sleeping rough since 2008. In its first seven years, homelessness in Finland fell by 35%, which was a remarkable achievement. We will all be looking to the pilots in Manchester, Liverpool and the west midlands.

While dwelling on Housing First, I always think of a chap called Wayne, whom I came across in north London. He had been in the Army. He left with post-traumatic stress disorder and ended up on the streets within a year, and he had stayed on the streets for the better part of a decade. During that time, he had been in and out of the court system on account of stealing so that he could fuel his alcohol problem. Within six months of his having come under the Housing First initiative, he had started to receive mental health treatment and treatment for his alcohol problems. Within a year, he was staying out of the court system entirely, and
now he has moved into work and a private rental settlement of his own. This intervention is the future; it is absolutely right that the Government are backing it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. With apologies to the hon. Gentleman who is about to speak for the short notice I am giving him, I am afraid that I must reduce the time limit from six minutes to four minutes.

3.44 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am perhaps unnaturally excited about taking part in an estimates debate. When I first picked up the estimates document earlier on, I thought that it was a private Member’s Bill speech by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). However, I am genuinely very delighted to take part in the debate, not least because I am a member of the Procedure Committee, which has helped to drive this change in parliamentary practice, alongside my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). It is also because I get to sit alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North, who has the ability to combine the subjects of budgets and procedure, so the stars have truly aligned this afternoon.

I want to focus my remarks on expenditure on housing and the need for another John Wheatley, who is one of my predecessors. The late, great John Wheatley served as the MP for my constituency from 1922 to 1930. Two wonderful things happened in 1924. First, the greatest football club in the history of the earth, Airdrieonians, won the Scottish cup, but, more seriously, John Wheatley was appointed Health Minister and pioneered an enormous expansion of social housing through the Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924. That legislation allowed central Government to provide subsidies to build public housing.

It was a small but significant step that saw over half a million council homes built by 1933. Today, sadly, in the Tay cities deal? Does he recognise that it is the Scottish Government’s reticence that is stopping money from coming to the city deal for Stirling and Clackmannanshire, as well as the Tay cities deal?

Luke Graham: No, I do not, so I will move on, but I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving at least something to Scotland—an extra minute.

Above all, I want to see a new John Wheatley at the Government Dispatch Box investing in social housing and abolishing the right to buy. If we do that, when we come back to debate estimates on housing expenditure in future years, we will start to see progress—real progress—in tackling the UK’s housing crisis.

3.48 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I want to whizz through an excellent partnership between YMCA Birmingham and the Government in providing accommodation for young, formerly homeless people. I spent an excellent three years of my working life working for YMCA Birmingham. It has been in existence since 1849, so it did not need my help to continue working—it had obviously been doing a grand job of work for a considerable amount of time. During those three years, and immediately before and immediately afterwards, the Government offered YMCA Birmingham tremendous support through what might seem to be a lexicon of the funding available. Indeed, YMCA Birmingham seems to have been SNP particularly lucky. Alan Fraser, the chief executive who appointed me, is obviously a very wise man, and the organisation’s success is partly down to his brilliance.

It is important to note that housing is a devolved competence in Scotland. We have now delivered nearly 71,000 affordable homes in Scotland since taking office 11 years ago. Indeed, we have a very ambitious target of building 50,000 extra affordable homes by 2021, 35,000 of which will be for social rent. I saw a number of those at Gallowgate only last week. Because we do not sell off our council housing, that allows us to make a dent in tackling the demand for social housing, which is something that Margaret Thatcher failed at spectacularly. In stark contrast, in June last year The Guardian reported that in England council homes are being sold off almost three times faster than local authorities can replace them, so the Government must do more on housing. It is deeply concerning that the Department has surrendered £742 million to HM Treasury for other housing schemes.

In my remaining 40 seconds, I want to address devolution deals. It is interesting to note in the estimates that other large reductions in the resource departmental expenditure limit include a surrender from the Department to HM Treasury of £74 million that had been earmarked for devolution deals. It has not gone unnoticed in Scotland that the Scottish Government seem to consistently underspend the paltry amounts offered by the UK Government to Scottish regions for regional or city deals. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North shares my disdain for the paltry amount served up, with a shortfall of £250,000 for the Aberdeen and shire city deal. Indeed, my hon. Friends from Ayrshire are still wondering when their growth deal will come. I want to see more support for city deals—
When I joined the organisation, it had just been given £450,000 of empty homes money. The Government had provided £100 million through two separate rounds of funding to bring buildings that had been lying empty for a number of years back into use as accommodation. I understand that thousands of properties across the country would benefit from such funding, if the Government were to initiate it again. We probably do not hear much about that because lots of those buildings are outside London—clearly our focus is largely only in London. Would it not be lovely if we could look north to the midlands and beyond, and share some of the money outside London? We used the £450,000 to bring a former social care building back into use. We converted the building to create 33 units of fairly self-contained accommodation—just three of the properties shared kitchen facilities.

During my tenure we also received £1 million in affordable homes money to create the Chris Bryant centre and the Vineyard in Erdington, with 33 flats of mostly single-bed accommodation. Also on that site, although not funded by the Government, we had a training and conference facility and a café, because the YMCA is diversifying its offering into social entrepreneurship to raise money to help to subsidise the excellent housing it provides.

Perhaps most importantly for this debate, the YMCA was also granted money through the homelessness change and platform for life funds to modernise its 72-bed hostel in Northfield, which I am sure the Minister will be visiting with me very soon—it would be lovely if she would just smile and say yes.

The hostel’s facilities were euphemistically described as “study rooms”—10 square metre rooms that had space for only a bed and a table. Twenty of those rooms have now been converted to include en suite accommodation. Money has been provided for training facilities on the site, and for health visitors to visit previously homeless people on site. Their chaotic lifestyles sometimes mean it is difficult to persuade them to get to a GP, so why not bring the health visitors to them? Government funding has allowed that to happen, so let us not say that this Conservative Government do not support the homeless and the provision of services in all tenures across the UK.

3.52 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Who would choose to spend £845 million of taxpayers’ money on poor, shabby, terrible temporary accommodation that is often never checked by local authorities? I could tell the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about all sorts of guidance on how local authorities should act, but none of that guidance is enforced or checked. Families are living in accommodation for which we would never wish to pay.

That £845 million could be better spent on thousands of modular homes—prefabs—that would allow people to be warm, dry and able to pay their rent. The estimates also show us that £72 million for affordable homes is to be handed back to Her Majesty’s Treasury by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government because the money is no longer needed.

Who in this House believes that that £72 million is not needed for affordable homes? If the Government do not feel they need it, they should give it to me. Let me spend it. I will spend it on 1,333 genuinely affordable modular homes. I can find the sites; I can suggest where we can do it. I promise the House that I can get £124 million spent by 1 April on real homes that people need.

We have so many of these debates, with lots of warm words and good intentions, but with not one house built. The time has come to get building. The time has come for each Member to pressurise their local authorities to release the land they are sitting on for social housing and to make sure that doing so is a priority—it currently is not for most local authorities. The time has come to talk about the green belt, most of which is not green and is not beautiful, and could be built on. There is enough land around London stations to build 1 million new homes if we chose to do it. The question is: do we choose to?

Bob Blackman: The hon. Lady reminds me that I piloted a Bill through this place to enable Transport for London to do precisely what she is asking for. Will she therefore join us in calling on the Mayor of London to do the job that he is elected to do and build new homes?

Siobhain McDonagh: I will do everything I can to encourage the Mayor to do that, but it is not just about the Mayor; it is also about the Government and local authorities. It is about how serious we really are about building homes, attacking shibboleths such as the green belt, and forcing local authorities to use the sites they have not to generate cash, but to build homes. It is about what our priorities are. Having sat in all these debates, I suggest that when it comes to it, we do not really want to do this. It can be done and it should be done, but it is up to us whether or not we choose to do it.

3.56 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in this debate on a subject I am so passionate about. In Britain, we are famous for moaning about the weather, especially this week, but it is unbelievable that in this day and age thousands in our country have to endure it without a roof over their heads. That is why I have been working to reduce homelessness, and why I think the Government’s target to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it by 2027 is so important. We need to tackle it with a multi-layered approach, because it is vital that we do not over-simplify the problem and its solution.

I represent a lovely constituency, which I believe is the loveliest pocket of Wiltshire. It is one that people would not necessarily associate with homelessness, yet it is a problem there. There are an estimated 147 rough sleepers in Wiltshire, but the official figures do not always paint the full picture; they use only one night and do not cover all of Wiltshire. In addition, we too often associate homelessness only with rough sleeping, yet it also includes sofa surfing and those in temporary accommodation. I stress that homelessness is not just a problem confined to the cities; it also affects market towns and villages. The problem might be more stark in London and other cities, but one homeless person is one too many.

At this point, I must commend the work of our local charity Doorway, which is based in Chippenham and whose role is essential, as the support and help it gives
local people is invaluable. In addition, I should mention the work of our local Salvation Army, which has offered support to me in dealing with cases, including by taking calls and offering care packages late at night.

I am a firm believer that when it comes to homelessness, prevention is key, which is why I was so proud to support the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. It will end the current postcode lottery in provision, and I agree with the chief executive of Crisis, who described it as “a crucial step... in fighting homelessness”.

It will make the system fairer, and it will mean that we will stop having to wait until it is too late; instead we will start to prevent homelessness, with personalised housing plans and support.

Crucially, there is evidence to suggest that a number of secondary issues are often triggered by homelessness, such as mental health issues, alcohol addiction and drug dependency, and so preventing homelessness will also prevent these problems. Homelessness is complex and needs a multi-layered approach to tackle it, so I welcome the more than £1 billion that has been allocated to tackling homelessness through to 2020, but it is important to note that homelessness is increasing. It is therefore vital that we tackle it head on with an ambitious multi-layered approach, which is why I back the Government’s actions.

I stress again the importance of not over-simplifying the solutions to a complex problem. We must look at homelessness in the round: putting money into mental health, financial education, debt support and the like will contribute to that. Colleagues have touched on the idea of a Housing First scheme, and I echo their sentiments in saying that I would like the Minister to speed up the rolling-out process.

Because of the time limit, I shall conclude swiftly and not mention my other valid points. Although there is a long way to go, I very much support the Government’s taking action to deal with this complex problem by addressing the solution in the round.

4 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Never did I think we would have to debate this issue after the work Labour did to reduce homelessness. [ Interruption. ] We are talking about people’s lives, so I do not need cheap comments from Conservative Members.

I want to put the Government under proper scrutiny, first by asking them why they think it is acceptable to halve homelessness by 2022 and abolish it by 2027—why not this year? People need housing now. We have heard how successful Housing First is and the academic evidence supports that. I am particularly proud of the work done by the University of York’s Professor Nicholas Pleace. He has highlighted how successful the scheme has been. Pilots have been carried out in Finland, Norway and Denmark; let us implement the policy now and change the life chances of so many people.

I wish to dig into some of the numbers, because I have some serious questions to ask about the allocation for housing programmes in the Budget. Why is so much money being allocated to Help to Buy? Two thirds of this year’s housing budget is expected to be spent on the Help to Buy scheme. What scrutiny has there been of the programme? Some £5.6 billion has been spent on it in 2017-18, and it is predicted that it will be £4.6 billion in 2018-19, £5.1 billion in 2019-20 and £5.6 billion in 2020-21. I ask because only 57 households in my constituency have benefited under the scheme, yet shares in Persimmon have rocketed, giving its bosses bonuses worth half a billion pounds, with the chief executive officer getting £112 million. Just 4% of that bonus could have solved the homelessness problem in my constituency, where homelessness has gone up by 15 times since 2010.

Homelessness is such a serious issue in my constituency. We have had zero new social housing units and no housing built altogether in the past two quarters. The only homes that have gone up since 2015 have been luxury apartments. That does nothing for the people of my city. We have not only street homelessness but lots of people living in inappropriate accommodation. I have seen in my constituency a mum who has to sleep on the floor next to her kids in the bunk beds, in a five-by-four room. I have seen a mum and dad who have to sleep on a single mattress in another cramped five-by-four room, with a cot, a baby on the way and nowhere to go unless they present themselves as intentionally homeless. I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) that that is a disgraceful term, because nobody is intentionally homeless. We need to put in place a Housing First policy to address these serious issues.

I call on the Minister to work with her Department to reject York’s proposed local plan. A site was allocated for family housing, but only 3% of it will be affordable, let alone provide the social housing that we need. In fact, the local plan presented to the Government seriously undercuts the number of housing units needed and does not address the serious situation in the city, where housing is completely unaffordable. The average rental price is £853 per calendar month, so people who are not intentionally homeless cannot access any housing whatsoever. They certainly cannot consider the housing ladder. I urge the Minister to look into this situation.

4.4 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) in this important debate. There are so many different issues that affect people’s lives and cause homelessness, but rough sleeping is particularly complex. I am thinking of those people who are out on the streets in this appalling weather, and indeed throughout the year. There are so many factors, ranging from mental health problems to family breakdown.

We must recognise that the family is the source of our health, wealth and education, so it is such a loss when someone loses their family home. That is why the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) has done through the Centre for Social Justice is so important, because having a home is the foundation on which we build all our other support networks. We all need that stability and security. That is clearly a problem for adults and parents, but growing up in an unstable home environment is especially difficult for children, as it is so much more difficult for them to reach out to get the help they need.
Homelessness often leads to mental health problems and to drug and alcohol problems. There is a particular problem with the increasing use of the drug Spice, which is cheap and readily available but has such a negative impact on people. The police must do more to crack down on the sale of Spice, which does so much damage.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems is that Spice is categorised as a class B drug, rather than class A, despite its impact?

Chris Green: The right approach by the police will naturally follow the right categorisation, so the clear suggestion is that Spice ought to be re-categorised as a class A drug, so that law enforcement agencies respond appropriately.

I want to take this opportunity to recognise the valuable work that Bolton Council and Wigan Council do to tackle homelessness in my constituency, and the important work done by charities such as Urban Outreach. The charity Crisis has recognised what the Government are doing, stating: “Crisis supports the commitment made by the Government to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. In the Budget there were welcome announcements of further funding on homelessness.” That recognition of money going to the right place is welcome. Bolton is set to receive an additional £187,000 over the next three years, which is very welcome.

On a recent visit to Greater Manchester, the Prime Minister committed another £1.8 million to end rough sleeping, and a further £1 billion overall has been allocated to tackle homelessness, running up to 2020.

The Government are doing their part, but local government also needs to do its part. Councils have an important role to play, because they are closest to the communities affected. It is really important that they do their job. We must also consider our new metro Mayors. I am pleased to recognise the commitment made by the Mayor of Greater Manchester to eradicating rough sleeping across the city by 2020. That is an incredibly important commitment. He will work with charities, churches, businesses and local government across Greater Manchester to achieve that, but also with national Government.

We must also recognise that the initial Greater Manchester spatial framework, which was intended to ensure that infrastructure and housing is developed in tandem, was not fit for purpose. There was far too much urban sprawl of three, four or five-bedroom semi-detached and detached houses, which will not solve the problem of homelessness and rough sleeping. We have to ensure that the right housing is built in the right locations.

I am pleased that the Government have committed to halving rough sleeping by 2022, and eliminating it by 2027. I look forward to their taking inspiration from the work that the Mayor of Greater Manchester will do to eradicate it by 2020.

4.9 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green).

Since 2010, rough sleeping has risen by 169% nationally and the number of households accepted as homeless has increased by a half. Incredibly, for the sixth largest economy in the world approaching the third decade of the 21st century, there are now 120,000 children living in temporary accommodation. Two weeks ago the desperate issue of rough sleeping was made urgent and immediate to this House with the tragic death of Marcos Amaral Gourgel just yards from this place. This came just four short weeks after the equally tragic death of a woman in my constituency of Warwick and Leamington.

This may come as something of a shock to many in this place, but the reality is that Warwick district is the worst for homelessness in the whole of the west midlands, according to Government figures. In fact, in 2015-16 the local district council received 705 applications as statutory homeless, of which only 172 were accepted. This is against a housing waiting list of around 2,500 people.

We are witnessing a humanitarian crisis on our streets. Rough sleeping and homelessness are in nearly every community, as we have heard from Members across the Chamber. It is clear that the causes of this crisis are many and complex, but fundamental to tackling the explosion in rough sleeping, as many Members have said, is the urgent need to build enough housing of the right mix and in the right place. I accept that there has been a failure of successive Governments to build enough housing, but the crisis has really developed in the past few years and been fuelled by the savage cuts to welfare.

The challenge to build sufficient housing needs greater ambition than that proposed by the Chancellor. Although 300,000 new homes a year may sound impressive, the harsh fact is that less than 2% of new builds will be council homes. Likewise, it was welcomed when the Prime Minister announced last September a £2 billion fund to invest in social housing—equating to just 25,000 homes—but it was also clear that the ambition was perhaps not enough against the true need.

I am committed to working to tackle this problem in my constituency and, by extension, nationally. Although I may not be able to alleviate the financial pressures of those who have seen cuts to their housing benefit, employment support allowance, personal independence payment or other support, I am determined to bring together all professional agencies and authorities to bring an end to this crisis in Warwick and Leamington. The target of 2027 is too late. As in Manchester, I really want us to resolve this—collectively and collaboratively—by 2020. In just two weeks I will hold a meeting with all those bodies, including mental health, homelessness, addiction and recovery charities, the two local authorities and a manufacturer of low-cost prefabricated modular housing. I found the comments of the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) particularly pertinent to that point.

Land is critical. I have said before that we must insist on or urge a change whereby local authorities are compelled to use their land exclusively for council and social housing. The truth is that the public are angry at the inaction of the Government in resolving this situation with urgency. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, promoted by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is to be applauded, but the woeful lack of urgent action by the Government to eliminate rough sleeping before 2027 is viewed by the public as a disgrace.

Critical now, as we have heard, is building council housing on an industrial scale. There have been just 47 council homes built in Warwick and Leamington
since 2010. We must provide temporary refuge and accommodation for those sleeping on the streets, and ensure that mental health and addiction services are properly funded and that we put money back into Supporting People budgets, which have fallen by 45% since 2010. Finally—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman cannot have a “finally”. He may have two words to conclude.

Matt Western: Two words? Thursday sees the relaunch of the cross-party group on council housing. All hon. Members are very welcome to join us.

4.14 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this debate about a challenge that has been particularly discussed in my constituency over the past few days.

We must look at how we quantify the challenge. At the moment, most of the statistics come from the rough sleeping counts, which date back to the Victorian era: the idea of walking around—a bit like a train spotter, but for vulnerable people—trying to spot people sleeping rough. If someone visibly might be homeless but is standing up in a doorway, they would not count and the process tells us nothing other than the numbers out there. For me, the statistics gained are pretty useless and can vary massively.

When I was deputy leader of Coventry City Council, it was supposed to have done brilliantly in addressing homelessness one year. We said that that was because we did not think the organisation that did the rough sleeper count had done a particularly good job, and a year later the number went up. That was not because anyone felt that the numbers had hugely increased but partly because of how the count was done, which was completely archaic.

I very much welcome what was done under the Torbay “End Street Homelessness” campaign and the proper connections week survey that it undertook recently. Volunteers spent a week on the streets interviewing people sleeping rough to find out why they were there and to treat them as individuals and humans, not as someone they had spotted from a distance. The process has produced useful statistics—actually a slightly higher number than the official rough sleeper count—and something that we can work on.

Then there is the campaign featured in the national media today: the “fake homeless” campaign, but there have been other examples. Police in Ely recently said that all beggars there were fake, and last year Middlesbrough Council identified nine fake beggars. Before people think that the campaign was launched by people who do not care about this issue or are particularly heartless, I should say that an organisation called Humanity Torbay launched it—a homelessness charity that has helped hundreds of people. The campaign was born of a frustration at the fact that the legal tools to deal with those who seek to defraud the public are so out of date as to be nearly useless.

The issue, of course, needs to be considered carefully; I accept that any change in the law must only be made in a way that protects the genuinely vulnerable out on the streets. But from what I have seen in the Bay, and having been out on patrol with Torquay’s neighbourhood policing team on Saturday night, I can say that people do not have the tools they need. That is why the legislation needs reform.

I welcome the work that has been done. I certainly welcome the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which is due to come into force on 1 April. However, the issue is not just about support but about a legislative framework that gives organisations the right tools.

4.18 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Madam Deputy Speaker, it is unusual and noteworthy for the three Front Benchers all to be female in a House of Commons debate. Not only that, but so are the Chair and the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who secured the debate. That is unusual and I am pleased that it has occurred as we approach International Women’s Day.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) made an excellent speech about the fact that we are debating the estimates without the information from the Government that we should have if we are to properly scrutinise budgets and departmental spending. If we look at either the supplementary or main estimates, we cannot coherently read across how much money is being spent on homelessness or how much of the money committed in any of the estimates is relevant for Barnett consequentials. That information could be made much clearer in the estimates booklet.

I welcome the changes to the estimates procedure, with the Backbench Business Committee rather than the Liaison Committee being the one to choose the subjects for debate. It was nice of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) to mention the work that I and my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) have done on this, and I am pleased that the House is moving forward. However, I am clear that much more change needs to occur in order for proper budgetary scrutiny to take place.

This has been an incredibly wide-ranging debate that I hope has given the Minister a lot to think about, particularly on the causes of homelessness and the ways to reduce it. One point that has not been mentioned at much length is the lack of recourse to public funds. That is a major issue in my constituency. Homeless charities such as Aberdeen Cyrenians and Shelter are bringing up the issue of people who have no recourse to public funds and therefore find themselves homeless.
That is a specific issue for those who are fleeing domestic violence, and I would be grateful if the Minister had a look at it. Women’s refuges do not get housing support payments for women who are fleeing domestic violence if they have no recourse to public funds. We should not be making women and families who are fleeing domestic violence homeless simply because they have no recourse to public funds. I do not think that that is the Government’s intention, but I would very much appreciate it if the Government looked at that. It is particularly the case for EU nationals. It has previously been an issue for those from outside the EU, who have had a bit of a grace period, but for EU nationals there is no grace period, and an increasing number of them are being given “no recourse to public funds” status.

Right to buy has been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East and a number of other Members. In Scotland we no longer have right to buy. That is incredibly important and has made a huge difference. I was a local authority councillor from 2007 to 2015, and the vast majority of my casework involved people who were on the waiting list and struggling to get a council house.

One thing that has not been discussed very much in relation to right to buy is the fact that 40% of the properties that have been sold off by councils are now in the private rented sector. Because a number of those involve housing benefit, the Government are having to pay more money for the same properties than if they had not allowed right to buy. It is a ridiculous situation and not one that the Government should continue with. Far be it from me to tell another country what to do with its policies, but if the Government want to tackle homelessness, looking at right to buy would be a really good way to go.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East mentioned some of the things we have done in Scotland. We are building a huge number of affordable houses, and importantly, we are spending three times more per head of population on our affordable housing supply programme than the UK Government are spending on their affordable homes programme. That is why we are managing to increase the number of social houses we have and why we are managing to improve the situation in Scotland, to ensure that more people have a secure roof over their head.

We have also taken significant action on homelessness and rough sleeping. Our programme for government in Scotland specifically mentioned a £50 million fund over five years. In terms of the estimates, the more money the Government give to devolved matters, the more we receive in Barnett consequentials. It would be incredibly positive if the Government were to properly tackle this issue and put funding into it.

A number of Members have talked about the causes of homelessness. People are falling through the cracks, and that is partly because of the benefits system set up by the Government. We have a system which means that people need to get back into work very quickly, but some people with the most complex needs and addiction problems who do not have a roof over their head are not going to get back into work in six months, 12 months or even two years, because they need intensive support over a very long period.

Last time I was in a debate such as this, a number of Members said, “There but for the grace of God go I,” and that is absolutely the case. People have not necessarily made any more bad choices than I have in my lifetime, but because of their circumstances, their bad choices have resulted in them being homeless. More needs to be done to recognise that they are just the same as us and have not made any more bad choices; it is just that they have had more bad luck than we have.

4.24 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) on securing this really important debate. It is incredibly important, as has been brought home to us this week, more than most others, because of the terrible weather we are having.

We all know that visible forms of homelessness have increased. We cannot walk around any town or city centre without seeing people bedding down for the night in doorways and makeshift shelters. In fact, when I walked down St Matthew Street in London this morning, I passed two rough sleepers who had all their belongings in a doorway. Given that I had been talking about affordable housing at an agency that is coming up with housing policies, I thought how perverse it was then to be walking past people sleeping rough in the street.

We know that on any given night last year about 4,500 people were sleeping rough on the streets of England—a 170% rise since 2010. I say “about 4,500” because we still do not have any method of accurately recording the numbers of people sleeping rough on our streets up and down the country. Until we get such a method, we cannot accurately address the scale of this problem.

As has already been said, the fact that people are dying on the streets of Britain in 2018 is entirely unacceptable. On Friday morning, however, a man named Rob O’Connor was found dead in Chelmsford, as temperatures dipped below freezing, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) mentioned, just the other week a man died outside Westminster tube station. In this bitterly cold weather, most of us are able to wrap up warm and return to our houses, but rough sleepers do not have the most basic options. It is absolutely clear that we must find genuine solutions to this 21st-century scandal.

There are now over 120,000 children living in temporary accommodation. The four-year freeze of the local housing allowance that started in 2016 has, according to Shelter’s research, the potential to put over 1 million households at risk of homelessness by 2020, so are the Government seriously planning against all eventualities that may arise? As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and, very eloquently, by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), the supplementary estimates have revealed that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has surrendered £72 million of funding for affordable homes. That money could have built 1,000 social rented homes.

There are a range of reasons why people become homeless. The most common are a breakdown of relationships with family, friends or spouse; mental or physical health problems, as my hon. Friend the Member
for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) said; alcohol and drug addiction; and being unable to find anywhere to live on leaving care, hospital, prison and the armed forces. The Harbour Place homelessness charity has been operating the SWEP—severe weather emergency protocol—process every night since 28 January in my constituency. It tells me that many of its service users say they became homeless after having their benefits sanctioned or withdrawn. That issue was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya).

The assessment that there is a clear link between welfare cuts and homelessness is supported by the National Audit Office. It has said:

“The ending of private sector tenancies has overtaken all other causes to become the biggest single driver of statutory homelessness in England.”

The number of households made homeless by the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy trebled between 2009-10 and 2016-17—from 11% to 32%.

Labour has a plan to solve the scourge of homelessness. We would make 8,000 homes available for those with a history of rough sleeping. We would increase security for private renters with new three-year tenancies and controls on rent. We would have a Prime Minister-led taskforce on ending rough sleeping and tackling homelessness, and we would build thousands more affordable homes to rent.

We have got a plan, but what have the Government given us? They inherited from the previous Labour Government a trend of falling homelessness, with what was described by the independent Crisis and Joseph Rowntree Foundation homelessness monitor as an “unprecedented decline in statutory homelessness”.

They have squandered that, with a 48% increase in the number of statutory homeless households; a 59% increase in the number of households in temporary accommodation, such as bed and breakfasts, hostels and refuges; and—at under 1,000 last year, compared with nearly 40,000 in 2009-10—a record low number of Government-funded homes for social rent.

I would like to use the few moments remaining to me to ask the Minister a few questions. First, how can the Government say that they are tackling the housing crisis when they have handed back £742 million to the Treasury—all related to housing schemes? Why has that not been spent? Why was it allocated in the first place? As has been highlighted, £560 million of that was for private ownership schemes; does that really address the issue of homelessness?

I have made a list. Rough sleeping, as my hon. Friends the Members for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) and for Birmingham, Edgbaston both highlighted, was reduced significantly under the Labour Government. On temporary accommodation, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Chris Evans) talked about the excellent work being undertaken in Wales by the Labour-led Government under Carwyn Jones. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) talked about the issues of funding for supported accommodation. Other issues include housing First; public health; mental health; social housing; affordable housing; healthcare and the life expectancy of people living on the streets; minority group issues, particularly LGBT support run by charities such as the Albert Kennedy Trust; housing benefit, with about £10 billion of housing benefit going directly into the private sector and not being invested in social housing; skills in the building industry—

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Melanie Onn: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman did not put his name down to speak at the appropriate time, but he should plan his time better.

My list also includes the number of planners in local government, property as a commodity rather than a home in the community and empty homes. All these issues have been raised by Members across the House, and it strikes me that much more should be done cross-departmentally between the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions. Are there any plans to undertake cross-departmental work to address the issue in the round? Is the Minister satisfied that local government has been provided with sufficient resources properly and fully to deliver the Homelessness Reduction Act? Finally, if she is so committed to the homelessness agenda why has the homelessness reduction taskforce not yet met?

4.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to wind up this important debate this afternoon. As the right hon. Member for Kingstone and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) noticed, an estimates day motion has not been voted against since 1919, so I am sure that we will continue that fantastic tradition today.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and my hon. Friends the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) and for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on opening this afternoon’s debate, as well as the 33 Members who have contributed. This topic is one of supreme importance and I know that it is close to all our hearts. I am appreciative of the experiences and expertise shared today, whether from a constituency or a wider perspective. I also remind Members of my entry in the Ministers’ register of interests. I shall try to answer many of the questions I have been asked.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have repeatedly been clear that one person without a home is one too many. That is why the Government have set an ambitious target to halve rough sleeping over this Parliament and eliminate it altogether by 2027. Now, given many of the recent stories and the personal experiences shared today, I am aware that that is no small feat. The scale and the nature of the problem is large, but I want to ensure the House today that this ambition is about more than just words. The Government are taking groundbreaking steps through spending programmes, legislative reform and cross-Government working to ensure that we are funding solutions to create long-term change while backing key programmes that are working.

We have allocated more than £1 billion to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping over the spending review period. This includes—the list is by no means
exhaustive—£316 million of local authority prevention funding agreed as part of the local government finance statement, and £402 million in flexible homelessness support grant funding for local authorities over 2017-18 and 2018-19, with further spending for 2019-20 to be announced shortly. I reiterate: more money will be announced shortly. This up-front grant funding is giving local authorities the flexibility to tackle homelessness strategically in their local area. There was the £100 million agreed at Budget 2016 to deliver low-cost “move on” accommodation for rough sleepers leaving hostel accommodation and people leaving refuges, and a further £215 million for central Government programmes.

Adam Holloway: Does the Minister not think it a no-brainer that if successive Governments continue with very high levels of immigration and fail to build houses, we are going to have a problem? I lived homeless in London for three months for a television programme. Nearly 50% of homeless in London are from Eastern Europe and there are horrendous hostels which are totally unsuitable for mentally ill and drug-addicted people. Unless we deal with the underlying causes of street homelessness we will get nowhere near to solving the problem.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for sharing his life with us. It is very interesting how we all have different experiences and bring them to bear in this House. I thank him for those comments.

The £215 million for central Government programmes features a range of innovative programmes and funding mechanisms designed to hit the problems square on. For example, we have allocated £28 million to fund three Housing First pilots for the most entrenched rough sleepers. Housing First is an internationally established approach to ending homelessness for people with complex needs. It works on the principle that, first and foremost, an individual is found a home and then provided services to tackle the cause. It is a new approach for the Finnish, who are the only country in Europe to see homelessness fall in recent years.

The funding also includes our £50 million homelessness prevention programme to provide innovative approaches to reducing homelessness, with prevention at its heart. This is comprised of a £20 million rough sleeping fund to help new rough sleepers, or people at imminent risk of sleeping rough, to get the rapid support they need to recover and move on from a rough sleeping crisis; a £10 million fund for social impact bonds to provide targeted support, over a different eight local authorities, for entrenched rough sleepers; and £20 million for local authorities to trial new initiatives to help people who are at risk of homelessness long before they reach crisis point. Across all three funds we are supporting 84 projects, encompassing 205 district and unitary authorities up and down the country, to ensure that more people have tailored support to avoid becoming homeless in the first place and have the rapid support they need to make a sustainable recovery from homelessness.

We know that a challenge for those who are homeless is access to tenancies in the private rented sector. That is why we announced at Budget funding of £20 million for schemes that will enable better access to new private rented sector tenancies or support in sustaining tenancies for those who are, or are at risk of becoming, homeless or rough sleeping.

On some of the specifics of the Department’s estimates for the 2017-18 financial year, our re-profiling of £9.1 million of the flexible homelessness support grant will enable us to support increased collaboration between London boroughs on the procurement of accommodation for homeless households, in particular with regard to temporary accommodation. The work required to set up a new procurement strategy and vehicle means that the funding cannot be spent this year, but will be required in 2018-19. A further £15.6 billion has been re-profiled for future years and preserved, so there is no reduction of the £25 million. There is also, specifically, £2 billion for housing associations to build social housing.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mrs Wheeler: No, I won’t.

It is important that in allocating this funding we measure the effectiveness of our investment. To do that the Department, with the support of external partners, will be undertaking and publishing a range of evaluations of the different schemes we fund. More broadly, the Department, along with the DWP, will be undertaking new research into the drivers that cause homelessness and rough sleeping. That will enable us to better assess the impacts of Government intervention and inform future policymaking in this area.

We all know that money alone is not the answer. We need to be searching for new solutions to entrenched problems. This is why just last week I was proud to sign The Homelessness (Review Procedure etc.) Regulations 2018, which enact key provisions in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 from 3 April 2018. I am sure Members will agree that the Act is a transformative piece of legislation that significantly reforms England’s homelessness legislation. Placing duties on local authorities to intervene at earlier stages is a key preventive step to reduce homelessness in local areas.

We are keen to ensure local housing authorities are equipped to deliver these changes. Last week, we launched our new “Homelessness Code of Guidance”, a comprehensive guide for local authorities on how to exercise new functions introduced by the Act, alongside existing statutory responsibilities. Of course, we have already agreed £72.7 million of new burdens funding, payable to all councils over the spending review period, and a commitment to review this going forward. I am exceptionally proud of the work that has gone into delivering these changes—the work of the Department and of my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) before me—and as ever, I remain grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for all his endeavours.

However, there is clearly more to do. As we prepare for the Act to come into force in spring, I am now chairing regular meetings of the new rough sleeping advisory panel that will feed into the Government taskforce on rough sleeping and homelessness, which is meeting next week. The advisory panel, which includes the Finnish Government adviser, Peter Fredrikkson, is made up of leading experts in the field, who will share knowledge, expertise and experience to support me in the production of a rough sleeping strategy, which I can confirm, will be reported in July this year.

I look forward to the months of work ahead and with pleasure to the opportunities to update the House.
[Mrs Wheeler]

I therefore commend the estimates in the name of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to be supported in the votes.

4.40 pm

Layla Moran: I thank every single Member who contributed to this excellent debate this afternoon. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) for co-sponsoring it and the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who made some incredibly good points about the sorts of things that we need moving forward. I also mention my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), who gave the geekiest speech of the day. Exactly the point of these estimates day debates is to follow the money. If I have learned anything on the Public Accounts Committee, it is that by following the money, we can get to the heart of the difference between words and action.

I thank the Minister for replying to many of the questions that were asked and for the clarifications that she provided. I found it disappointing, however, that there was still not a clear strategy on how we will build the new social homes that we need for the future. If I have learned anything on the Public Accounts Committee, it is that by following the money, we can get to the heart of the difference between words and action.

I thank the Minister for replying to many of the questions that were asked and for the clarifications that she provided. I found it disappointing, however, that there was still not a clear strategy on how we will build the new social homes that we need for the future. [Interruption.] The report was clear. I am also happy that she will come back to the House to update us in future. Let us keep talking about the money; in the end, in some ways it is the most important thing.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

Department for Transport

[Relevant Documents: Written evidence to the Transport Committee, on the Department for Transport Supplementary Estimates 2017–18, reported to the House and published on 20 February 2018; Oral evidence taken before the Transport Committee on 16 October 2017, on Policy priorities for the Department for Transport, HC 430; Oral evidence taken before the Transport Committee on 22 January 2018, on Rail Electrification, HC 702.]

Motion made, and Question proposed.

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Department for Transport:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £268,829,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £753,858,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) the sum authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £551,337,000.—(Amanda Milling.)

4.42 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank Members from on both sides of the House for their support for this debate, including my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who so ably gave the presentation on the debate before the Backbench Business Committee, as I was not able to attend. The range of support confirms that the Department for Transport’s spending priorities are of national concern across party lines and in every region of the United Kingdom. Whether it is on rail franchising or transport investment, I think that the Department is giving passengers and taxpayers a raw deal.

Given this breadth of interest, I am disappointed that the Transport Secretary has not come to the Chamber to hear this afternoon’s debate. I recall that he was also unable to attend our Back-Bench debate on transport in the north on 6 November. I am, however, very pleased to see the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who so ably gave the presentation on the debate before the Backbench Business Committee, as I was not able to attend. The range of support confirms that the Department for Transport’s spending priorities are of national concern across party lines and in every region of the United Kingdom. Whether it is on rail franchising or transport investment, I think that the Department is giving passengers and taxpayers a raw deal.

Given this breadth of interest, I am disappointed that the Transport Secretary has not come to the Chamber to hear this afternoon’s debate. I recall that he was also unable to attend our Back-Bench debate on transport in the north on 6 November. I am, however, very pleased to see the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), in the Chamber, and it is also good to see the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), who will respond for the Government. As well as representing the London seat of Orpington, he serves as the Minister for London, and I note in passing that not one Minister in the Department represents a northern seat, and not one represents a seat outside England.

I want to highlight the significant, long-standing problems with how we run our transport services and invest in transport infrastructure. I also want to press the case for a bolder, more ambitious approach to transport spending that leaves no citizen, no nation and, crucially, no region behind, and that will boost economic efficiency and growth post Brexit.

The international evidence paints a stark and disappointing picture. Britain’s infrastructure spending is the lowest of any developed country in the OECD. The inequality between our regions, measured according to gross valued added, is the widest in Europe, and our national productivity, as we all know, is low compared with other countries. These problems cannot be solved without better transport investment, and without better north-south and—very importantly—east-west connectivity.
Experts from the Institute for Public Policy Research North to the Centre for Cities, and from the National Infrastructure Commission to the authors of the northern powerhouse independent economic review, are all agreed that we cannot increase productivity and close the gap between our regions unless we dramatically upgrade our transport infrastructure and make up for decades of under-investment. This requires an ambitious investment programme for every corner of the country. In northern England, that means investing in bus services, not cutting them; dramatically reducing rail journey times; increasing rail capacity for passengers and freight; and modernising our rolling stock.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. The north-east received just 2.7% of overall public spending on transport from 2012 to 2017, compared with the 38.3% that London and the south-east received. Does she agree that the north has little chance of fulfilling its true potential if that unacceptable imbalance continues?

Diana Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for that point—I was just about to come to it—and agree absolutely.

If we are serious, such an ambitious investment programme means plugging what IPPR North has calculated to be a £36 billion gap in transport spending between London and the north, and accepting and building on Transport for the North’s plans for our region. Those plans would, by 2050, not only create 850,000 jobs, but partly pay for themselves by reducing the north’s fiscal deficit by 47% compared with business as usual.

A new approach to running transport services is also required. We need an approach on managing transport that works for fare-paying passengers, not dividend-threatening shareholders. Rail operators that mismanage services and threaten to default on their franchises cannot get away with it. Taxpayers’ money and fare revenues should be spent on transport investment, not on bailing out private companies that recklessly over-bid. Regions outside London need statutory, sub-national transport bodies with the same clout and borrowing powers as Transport for London. To be fair, the problems I have just outlined are not all the fault of the Transport Secretary or the Department for Transport, as many relate to the actions of successive Governments of all colours stretching back over many decades. However, the Secretary of State is responsible for what happens on his watch, and we are entitled to hold Ministers to account for the steps they take—or fail to take—to tackle these problems.

I have four questions for the Minister. First, how does he intend to act on auditors’ criticism of the effectiveness of a range of transport bodies and projects? The National Audit Office has been scathing about the performance of Highways England’s 2015 to 2020 road investment strategy, highlighting the fact that many of the promised road investments are considerably behind schedule. Network Rail’s operations have also been subject to long-standing NAO criticism. The NAO has also turned its sights on the Department’s role in a range of projects and franchises, not least the Thames garden bridge in October 2016. What will the Government do about these criticisms?

Secondly, in the wake of the east coast debacle, the Government need to answer pressing questions about the state of our rail franchising system. The recent problems with the Stagecoach-Virgin Trains east coast franchise risk undermining the whole franchising process. The situation sends a message to future bidders that they can get their sums wrong and over-bid, but still get a bail-out to the tune of perhaps more than £1 billion. The Secretary of State’s subsequent decision to extend Virgin Trains’ west coast franchise only reinforces that concern.

Last month, the NAO rightly announced an independent investigation of what had happened. Subsequently, on 5 February, the Transport Secretary came to the House with stern words about Stagecoach, but no concrete assurances that it would not win a future bid. I must say to the Minister that that stands in stark contrast to the swift, decisive action taken by Lord Adonis after National Express threatened to default on the same franchise in 2009.

This debacle also exposes huge problems with the broken franchising system. As has been shown by the answers to parliamentary questions that I have tabled, there have been fewer bids for rail franchises in recent years than was the case at the start of the decade. Since 2012, 13 franchises have been directly awarded without the promised competition.

Thirdly, if the Transport Secretary is so confident about the benefits of his transport upgrade programme and the scrapping of electrification, why will he not spell out the exact benefits it will bring? Last year, when he scrapped all electrification plans—outside the south-east, of course—in favour of bimodal diesel-electric technology, he assured Members in a written ministerial statement that “we no longer need to electrify every line to achieve the same significant improvements to journeys”.—[Official Report, 20 July 2017, Vol. 627, c. 71WS]

So why have Transport Ministers proved unable to answer my very specific written questions about the exact travel speed improvements, ongoing financial costs and emissions that passengers can expect from the new bimodal trains?

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): The Government said recently that they wanted to see the elimination of diesel traction on our railways in a few years. How can they achieve that if they are going to cancel all the electrification schemes?

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I hope that the Minister will respond to it.

While Ministers have admitted that following the scrapping of electrification the ongoing costs will be higher than they would have been with electric trains, they have refused to say by how much or what that will mean for future ticket prices. Although I have been told that the environmental impact of bimodal trains has been “taken into account”, I am not sure that an environmental assessment has been undertaken. It seems that big decisions are made in the apparent absence of basic information.

It is also astonishing that we still do not know the future of trans-Pennine electrification. No official announcement has been made since the Transport Secretary cast doubt on the project during a media appearance in
July 2017. I acknowledge that the rolling stock is being upgraded, but the very companies that are supplying it tell me that without improvements to the tracks, they will not be able to get anywhere near their maximum speeds. The developers at Great Western Railway have warned that its bimodal trains will be slower in diesel mode than the ones that they will replace. I hope that the Minister will commit himself this evening to an urgent, independent assessment of the impact of scrapping electrification.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I agree with a great deal of what the hon. Lady is saying, particularly her comments about the appalling east-west journey times in this country, which are a national disgrace, but the fault of generations of Governments who failed to invest. May I urge the House to add a fifth question to her list? Community transport is an issue of huge concern, given the proposals on which the Department is consulting. Never mind getting from city to city; what worries many of my constituents is the potential devastation of community transport if those proposals go ahead.

Diana Johnson: I shall be pleased to add that to my list of questions. The hon. Gentleman has been very clear about the subject on which he wants the Minister to respond.

My final point is about the need to tackle regional inequality in transport spending. Analysis produced by the House of Commons Library earlier this month shows that in the five years since 2012, London has received more than twice as much per head as the north. The figures for future projected spending look even worse. According to the latest analysis from IPPR North, London will receive £4,155 per head over the next four years, while Yorkshire and the Humber will receive £844 per head. The Transport Secretary could have responded to those figures with the candid acceptance of a problem going back over many years and by making a commitment to close the regional gap. Instead, he has sought to play down the disparity.

In an article in The Yorkshire Post in January, the Transport Secretary criticised IPPR North for including all Transport for London’s spending in its analysis, because many London and south-east schemes attract private funding. This is precisely the reason why northern MPs want a statutory body with the same borrowing powers as TfL: to boost private investment for road and rail schemes to go alongside a fairer share of state funding. The creation of Transport for the North, while welcome, will not correct that inequity—or certainly not any time soon. Its focus on 2050 means that many south-east schemes that are more advanced in their planning, such as Crossrail 2 and the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, will happen many years earlier than Transport for the North’s vision. Indeed, as I pointed out to the Minister during the passage of the Space Industry Bill, we are more likely to see commercial space travel than rail electrification to Hull before 2050.

In conclusion, I believe that the Secretary of State has questions to answer about the scathing National Audit Office report into spending by the Department for Transport. I also believe that he has wavered in his response to problems with the east coast franchise and let Stagecoach and Virgin Trains off the hook. He has scrapped rail electrification plans across the north, the midlands, the south-west and Wales, and failed to back up claims that those cuts will deliver the same benefits as electrification. He has also dismissed concerns about regional inequality in transport investment, even though such investment is vital for our national economic productivity and growth. As a northern MP, I am not asking what this country can do for the north; I am asking what the north can do for this country. It is time that the Transport Secretary and the Department for Transport also asked themselves that question.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for giving the House a perfect example of keeping exactly to time. However, as the House will be aware, a great many people wish to speak this afternoon, so we now need to have a formal time limit of five minutes, which might well have to be reduced.

4.57 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who has made a clear case for the vital role of transport infrastructure across our country. I want to talk specifically about the great county of Essex and our transport needs today. You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that Essex contributes more than £38 billion in gross value added to the UK economy, but with investment in transport infrastructure, we have the potential to do so much more.

I want to focus today on strategic rail and strategic road investments. Essex and East Anglia have historically missed out on funding from central Government sources. As a country, we are investing more in the railways since the Victorian era—something we should be proud of—with public and private sector funds making a significant contribution. Investment in the rail network now could put our economy in an even stronger position as we look to future-proof and grow our economy accordingly. Much of the investment in rail infrastructure comes from the public purse, and last year the Government announced their statement of funds available—famously known as SOFA—which totals £47.9 billion for control period 6, which covers from 2019 to 2024. That level of investment is of course welcome, and it is possible only because of this Government’s record on sound finances and the strong economy.

Within the Greater Anglia region, Network Rail’s route manager is seeking more than £2 billion of that funding for the Anglia route. My hon. Friend the Minister of State will be well aware of the bids that are coming through, and I hope that the Government will look favourably on that particular request. However, that investment would be for renewals and maintenance, and it would not include major strategic enhancements. Because of the changes that the Government are making, major infrastructure schemes are determined through a new process rather than through multi-year strategic control periods.

The great eastern main line needs significant improvements, and I know that the Department is well and truly versed in its needs, because Members of
Parliament from Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, north Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire came together through the GEML Taskforce to develop a prospectus for rail investment. That prospectus, published in 2014, was supported by the Government, including the former Chancellor, and contained a number of long-term proposals to improve services particularly for our long-suffering commuters, including new trains, which are coming, and, importantly, infrastructure enhancements such as the Witham loops to boost capacity, the Trowse swing bridge, upgrades to Howley junction, re-signalling south of Colchester, improvements to Liverpool Street station and other schemes that can no longer be kicked into the long grass.

Investing in these schemes will add over £4 billion to our economy, meaning more jobs, more income for families and more revenue for the Exchequer. That is based on a 2014 analysis, and I am sure a more recent review of the figures, given the additional housing supply in that part of Essex and in East Anglia, will project a greater boost.

Passengers who use the GEML pay more in fares each year, and over the next few years they will be subsidising the rest of the rail network by providing the Treasury with a £3.7 billion windfall. We would like to see that money coming back for long-term investments, because it is rail users in the region who are paying for that. They are contributing hugely and want to see the benefits coming back within the region. It is a complete “no-brainer.” The Government and the Chancellor spoke favourably about this at questions today and understand the significance of it all.

I also want to touch on the two roads that impact on Essex: the A12 and the A120, which connect Stansted to Harwich. They are economic corridors, and delays and congestion on them hold business back, costing companies millions of pounds each year. These roads have been earmarked for widening schemes, but they are subject to various processes within the Department for Transport, and I plead with the Minister to ensure we unblock any bottlenecks to those schemes.

As we consider the supply estimates today, I urge the Minister and the Government to ensure that these schemes can progress and are developed for the long-term benefit of the east of England.

5.2 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate on the spending of the Department for Transport, and I welcome this new format for estimates day debates. I will make a few points, and pose a couple of questions about the supplementary estimate, which I hope the Minister will address in his speech.

When we look at the Department’s spending and the announcements it makes, it would be easy to think that transport is about large infrastructure projects. Infrastructure is an important enabler, of course, but we must not lose sight of the outcome we want: it is about how people travel from place to place, how they get to work, and how they get to places to learn and study, and for leisure and for family and social life. Access to good transport opportunities enhances our quality of life, and its absence can lead to social exclusion and isolation.

Just two weeks ago, BBC analysis showed that the bus network is shrinking to levels last seen in the 1980s. Rising car use and cuts to public funding are being blamed for a loss of 134 million miles of coverage over the past decade alone, leaving communities with isolated residents unable to access the most basic services, such as getting to a health appointment or making a shopping trip. The Bus Services Act 2017 might help in some places, so what work have Ministers done to understand the effect of that shrinking bus network, and what impact is this having on other Departments, such as the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions, in terms of people’s ability to get to jobs, training or education opportunities? What are the Government doing to address those problems?

The second major concern to our constituents is the diabolical state of local roads. I will come on to issues around the strategic road network, but almost every journey starts and ends on local roads. This issue is raised time and again on the doorstep, and not just when I am talking to local residents in Nottingham, as there is a huge backlog across the whole country. The Department provides money to local authorities for local roads, including a pothole fund. It would be helpful if the Minister said something about the steps that the Department takes to ensure the value for money of the investment that it makes in local roads, because the current patch-and-make-good approach does not seem to be sustainable. My hon. Friends on the Front Bench have rightly called on the Government to fix it first. Yes, that would be a start, but I would say, fix it properly.

Scrutiny of the Department is vital. The National Audit Office has done some excellent work in providing an overview of the Department’s work and identified several key areas for improvement. The NAO’s work on the first road investment strategy found that the Department developed it before having a complete understanding of whether the 112 road enhancement schemes in the portfolio represented best overall value. As we come on to the second road investment programme, Highways England and the Department need to show that they are doing more to understand the value of the investments they are making and the steps needed to secure the wider economic benefits.

That is probably even more true of the rail investment programme. The work to modernise the great western railway has shown that the Department did not have a secure understanding of the costs of and schedule for electrification. That led to a reprogramming of the investment plans for control period 5. Electrification between Maidenhead and Cardiff is now expected to cost £2.8 billion—a 70% increase against the estimated cost of the programme in 2014. We know what a terrible impact that has had on the rest of the work in CP 5 that has either had to be cancelled or rolled over into CP 6. The Department has many questions to answer on that. What has been learned will have been lost through the cancellation of that work and will potentially have to be relearned all over again.

Many questions arise from these supplementary estimates that need to be answered. I look forward, on the Transport Committee, to asking Ministers those questions and receiving answers.
5.7 pm

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): This debate will, I am sure, unite the House in wanting more transport investment. We are chronically short of capacity of transport of all kinds in our country. That is true in the north as well as the south; in the east as well as the west. Many MPs will make good cases for their own requirements.

I am particularly optimistic about the UK economy once we leave the European Union—above all, because I look forward to spending the £12 billion a year that we currently have to send abroad. Spending that money at home will mean that jobs and activity come from it. That generates more tax revenue but also, above all, takes some of the intense pressures off the public budgets that have been particularly acute since the banking crash and the big cuts made at the end of the previous decade. Those cuts by the outgoing Government were particularly harsh on capital investment in things like transport. We all look forward to these budgets easing a bit and to the extra tax revenue that growth would bring.

But growth also brings the need for more transport investment. We are very conscious of that in my own area of the country, Berkshire. We need investment in road and rail capacity to catch up with all the additional houses, jobs and business investment that there has been over the past 20 years. We particularly need more road capacity, because in the first half of that 20-year period we had practically no road capital or road schemes approved by the then Government. Only now are we beginning to get a bit of the investment that we need to catch up. We will need substantial further investment because the Government look to parts of the country like Berkshire to carry on with very fast rates of growth in housing development and business development, which in turn will require that extra capacity.

Looking first at rail capacity, I urge the Minister to spend what are obviously limited budgets on two particular priorities. The first is digital signalling. We run only about 20 trains an hour on the very good track networks that we already have. We could easily get up to 25—a 25% increase in capacity—with modern digital signalling, and probably go well above that if we developed and improved the technology. We could also put in a few bypass links of track where we need more of those because we run a mixed railway and it would be better to have more places where fast trains could safely overtake slow trains providing a local service. That would deal with a lot of the capacity problem. Producing extra capacity by building new tracks is expensive and causes environmental problems, and people are not keen to have new tracks going past their front windows or back doors. I urge the Minister to concentrate his money on where we can get the quickest and cheapest results, which is through much better control systems and new types of rolling stock with the right ratio between carriage weight and braking capability so that we can run many more trains an hour.

We then come to road capacity. In my local area we particularly welcome the idea that councils are being invited to establish, with the Government, local strategic highway networks. Those council-controlled roads will be part of a wider scheme that allows access to bigger sums of money so that the roads can provide some kind of back-up or alternative to the main national highway network of motorways and trunk roads. My councils are working on that and are keen to be part of the bidding process, because we need local networks of main A-roads that have more capacity, better junctions, safer junctions and more ability to route cars and vans from place to place so that people can get their children to school, go about their business and carry on their work by using road-based transport to make their day more efficient.

We also need to ensure that the main highway network is well managed by the state, and I hope future smart motorway programmes can be done a bit faster and a bit cheaper. The current programmes are clunky. They are desirable, but it seems to take rather a long time to get the extra lane of a smart motorway into use.

I also hope the Minister and his colleagues will look at sea transport. We have some potentially great ports—they are good ports already—so let us have a free ports scheme for those who would like to promote more industry and development adjacent to the ports. Let us make sure there are better road links into the leading ports, and let us see what we can do about coastal shipping. That could be a good way of relieving some of the intense pressures on the coastal highways, which leave a lot to be desired on many parts of our beautiful coastline.

Please, Minister, we need much more capacity. Let us try to spend the money more wisely, and let us move quickly to a world in which we have more money to spend.

5.12 pm

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to raise two concerns. The first is about the ending of the operating grant for Transport for London, which is already beginning to have a significant impact on upgrades to the network, not least to the Jubilee line, and increases the prospect of the extension of the night tube to the Metropolitan line being much further delayed than originally planned.

Given that last time the Conservatives were fully in charge of transport in London my constituents saw a 60% increase in the cost of commuting into central London, it seems particularly unfair that, just as a Labour Mayor takes over in London, a second whammy should hit funding for Transport for London.

The bulk of my remarks will focus on a much less high profile part of the transport sector that does not see significant funding in the estimates, although it does see some funding. As the hon. Member for Briggs and Goole (Andrew Percy) rightly said when he intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who so ably introduced this debate, the community transport sector faces a devastating impact as a result of the Government’s proposed changes.

I am lucky enough to chair the Co-operative party, which has long campaigned under its people’s bus campaign for an expansion of the not-for-profit or social enterprise bus sector. The Co-op party believes that community transport and commercial bus routes should be able to be designated as community assets and should be subject to the same protections that community assets are afforded by the Localism Act 2011.

**Sir Greg Knight** (East Yorkshire) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Briggs and Goole (Andrew Percy) is not alone on the Government Benches in agreeing with those points. I agree that community transport is very important, particularly to people in rural areas.
Gareth Thomas: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s intervention. If the Minister is not willing to listen to me and to Opposition Members who share these deep worries about the impact on community transport, I hope he will listen to the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy). I hope the Minister will also pay further attention to the Transport Committee, which did an excellent piece of work on this sector.

Community transport is too often overlooked. It provides vital connections within urban and rural communities. Tens of thousands of people across the UK are reliant on community transport services for some of the most socially necessary journeys that have to be made. Many of the people who use community transport are among the most vulnerable in our communities, so the Government’s announcement that they were seeking to change the regulation under which the sector has been operating was met with shock, and it has placed many services under direct threat. Indeed, Enfield Community Transport has closed, partly as a result of the uncertainty arising from the Government’s announcement. I hope it is not too late for Ministers to find a way to back off from the drastic changes they are proposing.

What does community transport cover? It covers door-to-door transport, ranging from the relatively informal lift giving by volunteer car drivers to more organised schemes such as a Dial-a-Ride or Dial-a-Bus for people with disabilities and mobility difficulties. It involves community bus services and covers minibus travel for groups of people such as the elderly or others who struggle to get out and about on their own, where they are taken on shopping trips and such like. I understand that just one small group of commercial bus operators, led by one individual, which wants to cherry-pick community transport contracts provided by local authorities and the NHS, and which does not put anything back into the local area, has somehow managed to persuade Ministers that new rules are needed to interpret EU regulations affecting the drivers and licensing of community transport. I urge Ministers to rethink their support for this group of individuals and to reassess the importance of community transport.

Harrow Community Transport serves my constituents and is very worried about whether it will be able to survive if more of its drivers are required to undergo expensive and lengthy training of the sort that commercial bus and coach companies have to provide.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that a letter of clarification was issued in November, which, if it holds true, will solve all the issues caused by Mr Fidler’s letter in July? The danger is that there is still a consultation, so who knows where it could end up?

Gareth Thomas: If the November letter is symbolic of a Government wanting to sort out the problems in a positive way to ensure that community transport can survive and prosper, I of course welcome that. My sense is that the Transport Committee was not wholly convinced of that and of whether Ministers had yet got that fully correct. Perhaps the Committee will be able to haul the relevant Minister before it again to seek further clarification on that, or perhaps the Minister here today will be able to provide further reassurance.

Harrow Community Transport has been in operation for more than 40 years in one guise or another, and as a stand-alone charity and social enterprise since 1980. It has a fleet of 14 minibuses and wheelchair-accessible cars, carrying more than 30,000 passengers annually. It employs 12 full-time and part-time drivers, six passenger assistants, and has more than 40 volunteer drivers and a small admin team. It provides a community car service and a wayfarers’ club, which helps to provide access to places of interest for those living alone or in sheltered housing. I underline the point that those who run Harrow Community Transport, and have done so with great pride for a long time, remain profoundly disturbed by Ministers’ proposals. It is on that, in particular, that I seek clarity from the Minister today.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I share the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) about the threat to community transport services. When this debate was listed, I was immediately contacted by David Ouvry, the chairman of our redounded Chilterns Dial-a-Ride, because he is so concerned about the implications. We understand that the move away from permits and towards public service vehicle operator licences and passenger carrying vehicle driver certificates was precipitated by a commercial operator’s complaint about some competitive tendering. Nevertheless, if the proposals go ahead, the impact will be severe.

Chilterns Dial-a-Ride has a team of seven part-time paid drivers and 15 volunteer drivers, and the chairman and treasurer are volunteers as well. The staff have received thorough and high-standard training, which is regularly updated, and there are several hundred paid-up user-members. The team runs trips and outings and does some 13,000 to 14,000 passenger journeys a year—well over 1,000 a month. If all its drivers had to pass a PCV test, Chilterns Dial-a-Ride would almost certainly lose all its precious and essential volunteers. The same is likely to apply to most of, if not all, the paid drivers.

Even if we assume that the drivers would accept that they had to be PCV-trained and passed, the costs look astronomical for a small charity. Chilterns Dial-a-Ride employs 22 drivers, apparently 60%—or 13—would pass the first time, at a cost of £28,366, and paying for the remainder to pass the second time would lift the training costs up to a total of £50,704. Costs in excess of £50,000 would absolutely devastate Chilterns Dial-a-Ride, so when the Minister looks into this—I am aware that there is currently a consultation, to which Chilterns Dial-a-Ride has submitted its views—will he think again? Were we to lose such a facility in our community, it would not be the best use of taxpayers’ money, and it would certainly not be the best use of the Department’s time.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that we all welcome investment in infrastructure. Of course, for me, it has to be the right type of infrastructure. I could not let a transport debate go by without mentioning my pet project. I looked carefully at the figures, which show that the proposed changes in the supplementary estimate to the current departmental expenditure limit is around £308 million. I gather that the rise in costs is largely attributable to the need to cover an extra £265 million of High Speed 2 VAT costs. That prompts the question: how was that missed? I hope the Minister will be able to
let me know what the accounting responsibilities are that mean an extra £265 million of VAT has to be added.

I am concerned about the governance of HS2. The chairman of the project is leaving and the Department is recruiting yet another, and we have another new Minister on the project. After listening to the directors of Carillion this morning, I am not quite sure whether the Department for Transport actually has either the capacity to manage the project—although HS2 Ltd is an arm’s length body—or the procurement expertise to avoid facing the problems it is now facing because of the collapse of Carillion. I hope the Department has assessed the financial impact of the loss of Carillion from its contractual position. Is it looking into whether aggressive bidding has occurred on any other projects?

I wish quickly to mention two other things. First, with this inclement weather, I pay tribute to the transport teams that are gritting and keeping our roads going throughout the country, particularly those in Buckinghamshire. I have a plea for extra money: in the past six weeks, Buckinghamshire has reported 3,600 potholes, and I am sure the number is increasing as I stand here. Although the Government have put in an extra £200 million, there is no doubt that many councils, and many Members in the Chamber who represent councils, would welcome further investment. It is all very well to look into road capacity, but we must also consider the conditions of our roads.

Finally, on the Department’s priorities, what is it doing about hyperloop technology and, particularly, electric vehicle technology? The Department has to co-operate with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and any cross-departmental work is difficult. Will it please put those new technologies at the top of its list of priorities?

5.24 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing this debate through the Backbench Business Committee and providing Members with an opportunity to hold the Government to account on their spending. I am particularly pleased that we are debating the supplementary estimates for the Department for Transport, because I have frequently raised the issue of regional transport disparities in the House, and at the heart of this is the question of funding.

Put simply, the way the Department currently allocates and spends money is deeply unfair. It is unfair because its decisions on where to invest are based on a narrow and ultimately unsatisfactory value-for-money assessment. If the Government target transport spending in areas of high economic development or places where people already use public transport extensively, they are reinforcing inequalities rather than correcting them. Transport spending needs to be used as a tool for unlocking economic potential, and of course investment in public transport is one of the key ways of encouraging people to use it.

Bradford, like towns and cities across the north, is held back by a persistent lack of investment in our transport infrastructure. In recent months we have seen the cancellation of many rail electrification projects, the postponement of essential motorway upgrades in Yorkshire, and combined authorities forced to reduce bus services owing to continuing budget cuts.

The north as a whole, and Yorkshire in particular, is getting a raw deal. Recent analysis by the Institute for Public Policy Research North has found that the true extent of regional spending disparity is considerably higher than the Government’s estimates. Under this analysis, future transport investment in London is 2.6 times higher per person than in the north. London is set to receive over £4,000 per person, compared with just £1,600 per person across the north as a whole. The situation is set to be even worse in Yorkshire, the lowest of all regions according to IPPR North, where the figure is just £844 per person.

The Government’s future spending plans therefore fail to address the historical under-investment in northern transport and infrastructure. Addressing the historical underfunding in Yorkshire will require step-by-step increases in per-person levels of funding until they are equal to those in London. The ambition to create a northern powerhouse and rebalance our national economy will remain unmet for as long as the current funding disparities in transport remain in place.

Let me be clear that I have little to no problem with the Government investing in London’s transport system; I believe that all regions benefit from a modern and extensive public transport system. What I do have a problem with are the gross inequities between different parts of the country. These inequities have real consequences for my constituents. Bradford, a city of over half a million people, with a young and enterprising population and home to some of the country’s best known companies, does not have a through railway station and is not directly on an inter-city network. This means that train journeys between Bradford and Leeds take over 20 minutes and average only 33 mph. Is it any wonder that nearly 75% of the 45,000 journeys between Bradford and Leeds each day are made by car? Bradford’s unsatisfactory rail link is a perfect example of the wider problem. For too long, ambitious transport projects in the north have been passed over, while billions have been spent on similar projects down south.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case about the need for regional rebalancing. Does she agree that the Department for Transport needs to make changes to the transport business case methodology so that it takes account of the wider economic benefits that can flow from investment in transport, rather than just journey time savings for large numbers of existing transport users?

Judith Cummins: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, as always.

The establishment of the first sub-national transport body, Transport for the North, is a welcome step in correcting the regional imbalance, and I am particularly pleased that its strategic plan includes details of the northern powerhouse railway, including a new station in Bradford. In order to make this plan a reality, the Government must ensure that Transport for the North has the powers and, crucially, the money it needs. One way to quickly and effectively start making progress would be to unpick the skewed value-for-money formula
used by the Department for Transport to make investment decisions, and to create a new formula that stops favouring areas with historically high levels of investment.

Bradford and the north face particular challenges and opportunities, and these opportunities require real action by the Government. Above all, they require a real financial commitment from the Government in order to address the historical level of underfunding of transport in the north. This is the only way to unlock the north’s economic potential and to put fairness back into our transport system.

5.30 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): May I start by thanking you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your kindness in allowing me not to wear my jacket while I nurse my broken arm? I must confess that it is a transport-related injury. I tripped and fell while running to catch a tram, which is rather embarrassing given that I chair the all-party parliamentary light rail group.

In the short time available, I will make some general points about the quality of transport debates that we have in this country. I have been involved in transport debates for almost all the time that I have been in this House, either on the Select Committee on Transport or as the Minister’s Parliamentary Private Secretary. I sometimes find these debates rather depressing because this country is very good at finding reasons not to do something.

The Transport Committee is currently giving scrutiny to the airport national policy statement about whether we should have a third runway at Heathrow. I do not want to prejudge the outcome of our inquiry, but we were presented with a whole series of arguments as to why it should not happen. Had the recommendation been that we should expand Gatwick, different people would have made the same arguments. Time and again the decision on where to build extra airport capacity would be kicked into the long grass.

Just outside my constituency boundary is a lovely little village called Cublington. I mention it because it would be kicked into the long grass.

Now that it is up and running, there are few objections. The Virgin Trains East Coast situation is not a problem of a line losing money or failing on passenger satisfaction. It is making money—just not as much as was forecast. That is one of the reforms of the franchising system that I wish to see.

Look at Network Rail—a public body. It has problems and has mismanaged some projects, Great Western electrification being the prime example. However, let us also praise it when it gets things right. The Reading and Nottingham station upgrades have been a success and many other projects have been delivered on time and on budget. No system is intrinsically bad or good. My point today is that we should raise the quality of the discussion and not get locked into this stale old debate that too often plagues transport discourse in this country.

My final point in the few seconds that remain is please let us put the passenger front and centre of our conversations. Too often, the transport industry works in silos: it looks at what the rail or bus provision is. We have to look at door-to-door transport, embrace new technology and the opportunities that it brings. When we invest in new trains—enormous numbers of new rolling stock will be coming on to the network in the next couple of years—let us make them comfortable. Technologically, they are brilliant but a lot of them are dashed uncomfortable. Let us put the passenger first and raise our game with a proper debate about how we invest in and improve our transport infrastructure.

5.36 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and I were of any assistance, it was, as usual, as her obedient servants in this matter. She made a

“The dilapidated network, delays, abysmal debt...The situation is... untenable. The French...pay more...for a public service that works less and less well”.

The point is that there are good and bad in all forms of transport. We need to raise our game and think about what works, not get involved in ideological debates.

Similarly, every year we hear this argument that fare increases are the fault of the privatised system, yet there were inflation-busting fare increases year after year under nationalised British Rail. The debate is on the mix between what the farebox provides for revenue and what central taxation provides. There is a legitimate argument both ways, but let us get away from the stale argument every year that it is the fault of the private sector and that nationalisation would be wonderful.

Lilian Greenwood: I do not wish to get into the argument about why franchising is not currently working, but does the hon. Gentleman share my concerns that the supplementary estimates show that receipts are expected to be £248.6 million lower than expected? Although the Treasury is providing an extra £60 million to partially offset that, £188 million of income still needs to be found from existing budgets. Does he share my concern that the Minister will address where that money in going to come from given the shortfall in revenues from franchises?

Iain Stewart: Revenues go up and down; it is very difficult to forward-plan the income from a railway. The Virgin Trains East Coast situation is not a problem of a line losing money or failing on passenger satisfaction. It is making money—just not as much as was forecast. That is one of the reforms of the franchising system that I wish to see.

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compelling case for her own region, but I am delighted that she does not argue that we should rob Peter to pay Paul—take resources from my region, for example.

Rather than use my own words to talk about transport spending in London, I shall quote the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), Transport Minister until last month and not, I suggest, partisan in favour of the Labour London Mayor. He said last October that spend per head was a bad indication when judging the effectiveness of transport spending:

“The calculation for London...doesn't account for the substantial number of daily commuters and visitors, both domestically and internationally, who will be using and benefitting from the roads and public transport networks but who aren’t London residents...two in every three rail journeys start or end in London and there are eighteen times more passengers arriving into London during a typical morning peak than at Manchester, the busiest northern city. In particular, as the main international gateway into and out of the country, London will be the location for transport investments which look to serve passengers well beyond the local resident population.”

Indeed, there are severe funding problems in London, and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West mentioned the most pressing: the withdrawal of the entirety of the operational grant—£700 million. What other capital city would that be true of? But that is only where it all begins; we now hear that the money raised from vehicle excise duty in London, some £500 million, will also be spent only on roads outside the capital from 2021.

It feels sometimes as though these decisions are spiteful rather than strategic. The current Transport Secretary is perfectly happy to overspend his budget by £300 million—including, as the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) said, £260 million on VAT for HS2. He said that we could not make adjustments to the system of penalty notices in London, which would have raised £80 million within our own resources. He also refused to allow the suburban rail service to be incorporated. That would have been more efficient and supported by a number of Conservative MPs in the capital.

Gareth Thomas: Does my hon. Friend also think it is regrettable that the Department for Transport has blocked London from accessing the new national clean air fund, including, as the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham mentioned the most pressing: the withdrawal of the entirety of the operational grant—£700 million. What other capital city would that be true of? But that is only where it all begins; we now hear that the money raised from vehicle excise duty in London, some £500 million, will also be spent only on roads outside the capital from 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I call Sir Robert Syms.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I call Sir Robert Symonds. You have four minutes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I call Sir Robert Symonds. You have four minutes.

5.43 pm

Sir Robert Symonds (Poole) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I would like to support what the Government broadly are doing, which is to try to increase spending in the transport sector.
Transport is one of the few areas where the Government are necessary to get projects built. In the UK, sometimes I wish we were rather more French in getting on with major public sector projects. If we look at the miracle of California, it was built on state funding of highways, universities and armaments, and on that, the private sector miracles around Stanford University and Palo Alto were built. Unless the Government get on and invest in our strategic road network and many other roads, private sector companies and businesses cannot develop.

I grew up very near to the M4, which was built when I was quite young. It has had a major transforming effect on the communities around it. The economic benefits of a sensible road programme are self-evident. As an MP from the south of England who drives on the M25, the M4, the M3 and occasionally other such roads in the south, it is clear to me that the whole of the motorway network is under pressure. At the beginning of the day, nearly all the road junctions have tailbacks on to the motorways, so they require added investment.

The road network represents billions of pounds of historical investment. If we concentrated on dualling, bypasses and dealing with pinch points, the economic value to our country would be very substantial indeed. It just needs a little bit of common sense, and we could get a lot more out of the road network. I am a believer in that, and we need to be doing more if, post-Brexit, we are going to keep the British economy rolling on. There must be a major cost when we have tailbacks off motorway junctions sometimes for 5, 6 or 7 miles, and the Government really need to deal with that.

I am also a believer in the need to invest in some major strategic projects. I agree with the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) that HS2 will make a major difference. If we look at where the investment is going, we find it is at Euston and Old Oak Common, and in building tunnels. It will have a major impact on London, but also on Birmingham. The railway has to go to the north because it will be a major economic boon for the communities that it will go to. We have to invest and have a long-term plan for such projects because they will sustain and underpin the economic prospects of our country.

I must admit that I have a few concerns about expansion of Heathrow, not least because it would require moving the M25 and the M4. The economic consequences of doing that would be very substantial indeed, so we must think very carefully about it. I have always thought, whether in relation to Stansted, Heathrow or Gatwick, that we can add value by improving the rail and public transport links to the airports. On many occasions when I have ambled through the countryside on something called the Stansted Express, I have thought that if it was just a little bit faster, we might get rather more value for the major infrastructure investment at Stansted.

We have major investments already, but we should look at pinch points and at stretching what we have already. To pick up the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), there are certain things we can do with signalling or dualling on the road network that will get much more value out of a network. Public investment is very important, and now that we are getting the deficit down, I am pleased that we can start to think about long-term planning to create success for our economy.

5.47 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing the debate. It is a very timely one for the south-west, as I shall explain in a moment.

It is no secret that I think that transport links in the south-west are underfunded, as addressing that has been one of my main priorities since entering this place last June. It comes on the back of the need for the south-west to stop accepting the poor deal for transport that we have been given for so long. My transport campaigns in the south-west are about giving us a fair deal by reopening Plymouth airport, extending the M5 from Exeter to Plymouth, and funding our train line properly so that it is faster and more resilient in bad weather. As a region, we have been given—and, importantly, we have accepted—a poor deal for far too long.

Across nearly all areas of Government spending in the south-west, the far south-west, which I represent, has received below average spend. My Labour colleagues have talked about the gap in transport funding for some time. Based on the Treasury’s “Country and Regional Analysis” publication last year, we in the far south-west receive about £277 per head. In London, the figure is £973 per head, which means that London gets three and a half times what we get in the far south-west. I do not mind London getting another tube line, HS2 being built or a new runway at Heathrow so long as the far south-west gets its fair share—not more, just our fair share—but that is not happening at the moment.

That is why tomorrow is such an important day for the Government: we will see whether they will put their money where their mouth is. On 30 January, south-west Conservative MPs threatened to rebel on a vote against HS2, and the Transport Secretary wrote them a letter to quell their concerns. In it, he said that Dawlish—the part of the train line washed away by the storms in 2014—“remains our number one national priority”. I simply do not believe that Dawlish is the Government’s No. 1 national priority when it comes to rail. Looking at the blank faces around the Chamber, I see that no one else does either. The DFT also promised in its letter, which was sent only to Tory MPs and therefore, sadly, not to me or to my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), that work at Dawlish would begin “quickly”. We have heard that before—jam tomorrow.

What we are looking for tomorrow is a full statement and a plan that will adopt the Peninsula Rail Task Force recommendations, and that is lucky because the letter went on to say that “the DFT will set out our strategy, following the PRTF report, by the end of February.” That is tomorrow, so I invite the Minister to confirm that the DFT will publish a south-west rail strategy tomorrow, that it will adopt the recommendations of the Peninsula Rail Task Force and, importantly, that it will match Labour’s pledge of funding £2.5 billion for this rail action, which covers the first 10 years of spending set out by the Peninsula Rail Task Force. Failure to publish that strategy tomorrow will show the south-west that we have been let down yet again by this Government.

We need action, words and funding to follow the agreed plan. That needs to be based on what can be delivered, not promises of jam tomorrow and vague promises of upgrades.
The far south-west has had too many promises since David Cameron came to the region in 2014 saying that money was no object in restoring our train line. The orange army did a great job in restoring Dawlish, but the investment has not flowed in since then, which means that our journeys are too slow and the service is not resilient enough. In the bad weather we are having at the moment, there is a risk that CrossCountry rail services will stop at Exeter and not continue to Penzance. That is because CrossCountry services cannot cope with the salt water of the waves washing over them at Dawlish, so they have to be cancelled. No other part of the country would accept that poor deal, and I say to the Minister that the south-west will no longer accept it. I ask him please to publish that strategy tomorrow—let us get on and fix our railway.

5.51 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I guess that there is at least one thing on which the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and I would agree: the need for more investment in the south-west. There is no question about that. However, unlike him, I am absolutely convinced that we will get exactly what the Secretary of State promised. He promised—he put it in writing—that he would give us information on what he will do about Dawlish and that he would set out in full his response to the Peninsula Rail Task Force. I am confident that we will get that.

I also do not agree that Dawlish is not the No. 1 priority. If the hon. Gentleman is as keen as I am for the south-west to stay on the map, he should remember that if the rocks fall at Teignmouth, the whole of the south-west will be cut off. That is not acceptable. It is therefore—why should it not be?—the No. 1 priority for the Department. As we have to wait till tomorrow to hear about that, today I would like to concentrate on the same subject as other hon. Members: community transport.

Clearly we are at the rough end of the EU hearing and Court judgment that have required the Government to interpret sections 19 and 22 permits in a very different way. The reality is, as others have said, that community transport simply cannot sustain itself without revenue from grants, other income and local government contracts, so the flexing of the interpretation that allows committee groups to flourish and continue is crucial. Most will not or cannot afford to revise their procedure to take account of the regulatory progress and, frankly, the trustees are not prepared to take the increasing risk. Can we blame them? After all, they are volunteers. At the end of the day, who will foot the bill? It will be the taxpayer, because the county council—in my case Devon County Council—will have to foot the bill for the extra cost to fill the gap.

The Government’s consultation is under way, and that is welcome, but the process needs to involve careful consideration of how to deal with the problem. I have a letter dated 8 February from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire ( Jesse Norman), who is dealing with this, and he sets out that exemptions should of course apply to these community groups. He said that an exemption applied when there was no alternative contractor, if the alternative contractor confirmed that they did not regard the community group as a competitor, if the activity was occasional, or if the service was free. With respect to my hon. Friend the Minister, that is not really going to work for Devon, as it does not begin to take account of some of our challenges.

Although a fund of £250,000 for licensing is welcome, it does not help us, because the overall bill will be huge, and that would be a small drop in the ocean. That is aside from the risk that would have to be taken on. As for exemptions for short journeys, Devon is one of the largest and most widespread counties in the country, so there is no such thing as a short distance.

We use our community transport for school contracts and a number of social outings, so I need a better answer from the Government for Dawlish Community Transport, Newton Abbott Community Transport, and Volunteering in Health Teignmouth. At the moment, my county council is acting as if the current interpretation under the recent case law is the way we are going to make progress. That means that the risk is being held in the hands of not the county council, but the voluntary groups. These are volunteers in desperate need; there has to be another way of doing this.

5.55 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): I, like a number of colleagues, will focus on community transport. As a Labour and Co-operative MP, I am particularly keen to talk about the not-for-profit sector.

The Co-operative party believes that community transport and commercial bus routes should be designated community assets that are, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) said, subject to the same protections as community assets are afforded under the Localism Act 2011. T ens of thousands of people rely on these services for some of the most socially necessary journeys. The Government’s announcement that they seek to change regulations on the community transport sector was a big surprise. As a result, many such services are now under threat, and there will be a reduction in this socially necessary public transport.

Community transport is a very broad term. It includes local road passenger transport services delivered by charities and other not-for-profit organisations, typically where there is no viable commercial market. The core of community transport organisations includes door-to-door transport, informal lift-giving by volunteer car drivers, Dial-a-Ride and Dial-a-Bus, particularly for people with disabilities and mobility difficulties, and groups such as the elderly and others who struggle to get out and about. This transport is required, for example, to take them on shopping trips.

The Community Transport Association estimates that tens of thousands of people, many of whom are the most vulnerable in our communities, access this form of transport. It has outlined why these journeys are such a lifeline for many. Preston Community Transport, which is based in my constituency, is just one such community transport organisation. It claims that there are now “significant problems as a result of the Department for Transport’s proposed changes to permits and licences. The Department has opened a consultation, but many are still very concerned about the assumptions that lie behind it, and by the fact that the Statutory Instrument to implement these changes has already been drafted. If the changes were to go ahead as proposed, the
impact on Preston CT would be damaging. It would mean an almost total loss of volunteer driven transport in Preston and surrounding areas, as well as having a knock-on effect where paid drivers are used. This would damage the entire business model and we have no ability to absorb such an impact.”

Preston Community Transport represents more than 400 not-for-profit groups and organisations. On average, 38 people a day go on a trip that keeps them socially connected. It operates beyond Preston, but is part of an interconnected whole. Some areas support others, so without one piece, even services that are seemingly unconnected to the proposals, such as car schemes in Wyre, could collapse.

Ministers appear to be fixed in their belief that the changes will affect only a small number of community transport organisations and, even then, only those that “act like a bus company”. That is getting close to being disingenuous, as the evidence of likely impacts is there if we look for it. The Transport Committee’s report published in December was clear in recommending that the Government must protect the social value of community transport and that the Department “must not use a sledgehammer to crack a nut”. I hope the Minister will take note of community transport organisations and take the relevant action required.

5.59 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Governments are usually driven by events—events that are unpredictable and therefore unpredicted. Events can sometimes seem pivotal but are often momentary, yet they have the capacity to absorb a great deal of Government resources, time and effort. It is important that Governments step back from events and think in themes. A thematic concentration that allows Governments to plan strategically is critically important in the area of transport, in particular.

This Government have a reasonable record, as did their predecessor, on trying to address some of those themes, yet there is more to do. In the longer version of my speech, which for the convenience of the House I will place in the Library, so that people can be edified and informed by it, I set out the detail of those themes. For the sake of the time that we have available, I will highlight them in this way: it seems to me that there are three.

First, what is the purpose of travel? Over recent years, the blithe assumption has been that it is desirable for people to travel more and more. My contention is that this is not necessarily so. People are obliged to travel further to work, school, leisure, shops and so on. I am not sure that that is compatible with their wellbeing, and we need to think creatively about policies across Government which create that kind of obligatory need to travel, rather than to travel by choice.

Secondly, if we are going to invest in infrastructure, of course it is about what we do in terms of plant, but it is also about people. Equipping people with the necessary skills to make infrastructural investment happen, and to make it work, is vital. The Department for Transport has a good record in this respect. Two reports have been produced—one in 2016 and a review in 2017—that chart the number of skilled people that will be necessary to deliver the ambitious plans for road and rail investment, but we need to be mindful, because the pace of change is considerable. The second of those reports states:

“Our work shows that in the coming years in the roads and rail sectors, we will require a trajectory reaching 5,000 to 8,000 apprentices per year.” That is an enormous step change in the level of skills and we will need to monitor closely whether we can meet such ambitious targets.

Beyond people and purpose, the third theme is pace. Technological change will alter where we travel, how we travel and in what we travel. It is necessary for any strategy to be sufficiently dynamic to take account of that technological change, which will by its nature alter some of our core assumptions. Purpose, people and place: those are the themes that this debate gives us chance to consider in greater detail and at further length as we reflect on this early dialogue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) spoke about the need to be ambitious in transport debates. Let me end with this point. Chesterton said:

“The centre of every man’s existence is a dream.” Let us dare to dream about what transport can offer, and let us measure the effectiveness of all we do in respect of popular wellbeing. When each feels valued, all feel valued. If we want to build the common good and to use transport to help to do so, we must measure all we do in terms of wellbeing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I do not really want to make the time limit three minutes, but if Members could just knock a bit off their speeches to help one another, it will get us all there.

6.3 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I rise to speak about railway costs, the way they have exploded in the past 25 years and what I think now needs to be done. I will speak, by way of example, about the incredible increase in the costs of rail electrification.

The Minister and his departmental officials may have seen the illuminating recent article in the Rail Professional journal by Don Heath, a brilliant railway engineer who led and masterminded the electrification from Hitchin to Edinburgh in the late 1980s and early ’90s. In his article, he describes how that was done and achieved so efficiently. It is a fascinating read. He concludes by contrasting the costs of that earlier electrification with present-day electrification costs. It is almost beyond belief that, stripping out inflation, costs are now seven times greater than when the east coast main line was electrified. They have multiplied by seven times in real terms. I urge the Minister and his officials to read Don Heath’s piece. The modern, bloated costs of electrification have led directly to the abandonment of the Great Western scheme to south Wales, Bristol and Oxford, the Kettering to Sheffield electrification, as well as electrification from Manchester to Leeds.

The ballooning cost of railway track work in general is not new. It happened very soon after privatisation and has continued. In my early days in the House, I raised these costs several times with Transport Ministers. I had been informed by sources inside the industry that track maintenance costs had risen fourfold and track renewals fivefold since privatisation. At no time did Ministers say that my figures were wrong, and the
Secretary of State once said that costs should be reduced by 80%. It was astonishing. A little later, however, Network Rail agreed that track maintenance should be brought in-house. Sadly, the inefficiencies that had developed in the private contracting sector were brought in-house, too, the same methods having been brought in-house together with the same people to manage them. I also pointed out to the then chair of Network Rail that the thick end of track maintenance and thin end of track renewals overlapped and that leaving track renewals outsourced while insourcing track maintenance was illogical. He grimaced but did not challenge my view.

There is now a dwindling resource of expertise in the industry, with a handful of older British Rail-trained engineers often trying to pick up the pieces of mistaken work on the tracks. The loss of skills is a major problem that can be addressed only by rebuilding a dedicated, comprehensive, in-house, permanently employed cadre of skilled railway engineers and operatives. British Rail had that, and it worked. British Rail has been wrongly maligned, when it actually worked “miracles on a pittance”—not my words but those of the rail regulator some 15 years ago. It had the lowest railway costs in Europe, except for Sweden; now our railways are the most expensive in Europe. The answer to the problem is obvious, and I urge Ministers to think on it.

6.6 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I want to focus on the south-west and, of course, North Devon. I say to the Government that we have made good progress on infrastructure investment in that region’s transport network, but there is more to do, and I want to focus on a couple of areas where I believe that to be the case. The first—Members will be relieved to hear me mention these four words—is the North Devon link road. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”] Absolutely. I could not get 30 seconds into my speech without explaining the vital importance of this link between the motorway and North Devon. Just before Christmas, we handed a bid for £80 million of funding from the local majors fund to the Transport Secretary. I am sure he is thinking of nothing else and will soon give us extremely good news.

We have already had good news. The Minister came to my constituency in the summer and announced a £5 million funding package for improvements between the motorway and Tiverton, but there is much more to do. I very much welcome the announcement of the major road network process, which ring-fences vehicle excise duty for roads that are under local authority funding control but which, in my view, should never have been de-trunked—it happened under a previous Government. The A361 is a case in point. I hope, then, that the major road network fund will benefit the North Devon link road. We look forward to that announcement.

The welcome investment in other roads in the south-west—the A30, the A358, which provides a vital link, and the A303 in two places—will provide better transport links to the south-west, which are vital to unlocking the economic potential there.

I move on to the railways. We have a railway line in North Devon linking Exeter with Barnstaple. I welcome the fact that GWR, the train operating company, is undertaking a consultation and is working closely with the Tarka Rail Association, which I commend for all its work. There is a need to improve journey times for commuters between Exeter and Barnstaple and, in particular, to increase the capacity and quality of some of the carriages on that line. I note that the deadline for the consultation is 4 April. I hope that the Minister will be watching carefully, with a nose for the need for further investment in that line. It really could unlock greater economic potential.

On the greater south-west, reference has already been made to the excellent report by the Peninsula Rail Task Force, which suggested a fairly ambitious scheme of investment in the rail line down to the south-west. I note, as did the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), that we were promised an answer before the end of February. We have 36 hours to wait. I feel sure that the Transport Secretary will give us the good news that we want on the Peninsula Rail Task Force before long.

Let me briefly—in the 36 seconds that I have left—echo what has been said about community transport. I have received representations, and have visited Go North Devon in my constituency. I say gently to the Minister that we need to look at the issue again, because it is of concern to that community transport group.

We speak about the northern powerhouse and the midlands engine. We have not yet got a snappy name in the south-west, but we are like a coiled spring. We are like Zebdeee on steroids. We just need to be unlocked with better investment in our transport. I welcome what we have already had, and look forward to more to come.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I was hoping that the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) might shave a little off. If others do not follow his example, I shall be very grateful.

6.10 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I shall raise two points that are close to my heart. I raise the first in my role as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary cycling group. Additional investment in cycling and walking can bring about a win-win: improved health, improved productivity and learning for people who take exercise at the beginning of the day, reduced congestion, reduced travel costs and better air quality. Segregated cycle paths will prevent cyclists from being “doored and floored” by inconsiderate car occupants who do not look before they open their doors. I urge the Department for Transport to encourage and incentivise investment in cycling, whether it is delivered by Highways England, by local authorities or by developers. There is a good opportunity to include cycling infrastructure in major projects. For instance, a cycle route could be constructed along the route of HST, and making it part of the design stage would avoid much higher retrofitting costs down the line. Government figures show that investment in cycling infrastructure pays back £5.50 for every pound. I am sure Members will agree that that is money well spent.

Let me now move on to my other favourite subject, Heathrow airport and runway 3. I also co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on Heathrow expansion, to which we are generally opposed. I am grateful to my
friends who represent northern constituencies, because they have made some powerful points with which I absolutely agree. They are severely disadvantaged by the regional disparity in respect of transport infrastructure, and they are right to ask for borrowing powers and increased investment and support from the Department.

Halting any further investment in runway 3 would be part of the solution. The Department itself estimates the likely net economic benefit to the UK to be almost nothing: £0.2 billion to £6.1 billion, over 60 years. That is less net benefit than would be produced by the expansion of Gatwick. There are no proposals to fund the essential road and rail infrastructure that is necessary. Heathrow airport will provide only just over £1 billion, but the Airports Commission says that between £5 billion and £6 billion is needed, and Transport for London has specified £15 billion to £18 billion. There would not be adequate world-class noise insulation for our residents, and there are no funds for the replacement of the fairly recently built waste transfer station. Airlines are unwilling to fund the runway because they are already paying the highest slot costs, I believe, in the world; they are certainly paying, by a long way, the highest airport charges in Britain. Without extensive subsidy, the number of domestic routes served by Heathrow will fall from seven to four. The project cannot be completed and also remain within air quality limits. There is unused capacity at several other London and regional airports. Those are many good reasons why the project should be halted now.

6.14 pm

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Notwithstanding the weather, the House should be basking in the warm glow of success, at least as regards productivity. I am delighted to say that, just at the point when the Office for Budget Responsibility threw in the towel and gave up, we embarked on the first period of sustained improvement in productivity for seven years. Maintaining that is critical, and, as has been agreed on both sides of the House, part of the answer is improvement in our infrastructure.

I am delighted that we have more than £460 billion in the pipeline for infrastructure investments, and over half of that will be coming from the private sector. I sincerely hope that part of it—I beg to differ from the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) here—will be the expansion of Heathrow; we have talked about that enough and we need to get on with it, but I will not go further into the debate on that with the hon. Lady, given the time limit today. I am pleased that since the financial crisis we have, notwithstanding the other pressures, maintained the investment in our infrastructure, which has exceeded in terms of GDP percentage that of France and Germany over the period.

I listened carefully to the proposer of the motion, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), and I agree that this is a national challenge. I went through the details of this, and I warmly welcome the TransPennine route upgrade, think it is a smart move to make smart motorways of the M60, M62 and M6, and, bowing into the detail, support the £100 million being spent on the Tees Valley A19. What will please the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth is the £14 million being spent on cycle lanes in Gateshead and Newcastle. Those are all examples, both very small and very large, of the Government acting to ensure we boost our productivity and make this a better place to live across the country.

Above all, the establishment by this Government, with £260 million of funding, of Transport for the North is a good move; it will create proper and good national advocacy through that body. One might wonder why I am saying that as a Member for a Sussex constituency; I do so because it serves the interests of Horsham and the whole of the country if our economy and our growth are broadly based.

I am pleased to represent a constituency in one of the most productive parts of the country, however, and, while we recognise the need to have growth across the country, we must also recognise the need for that most productive part of the economy, London and the south-east, to continue to succeed, and for that engine to keep humming. That, too, is in the national interest.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) said, when she was rail Minister, that the best way to get the country’s productivity going was to make certain that Southern rail worked. She was right then, and it is still true now. We have for too long neglected infrastructure expenditure on our commuter lines in the south-east.

I had two key points to make. One was about digital railways, which has been amply and brilliantly made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), so I do not need to wax lyrical on that in the minute remaining to me. But I must refer again to Southern rail. I welcome the investment going into London Bridge and the Balcombe tunnel, which has been there since 1840 and is used daily by Thameslink. I would welcome that as part of an ongoing programme proposed by the Brighton Mainline Alliance, which I sincerely hope it will force through. We must upgrade Windmill Bridge junction and develop East Croydon station. That alone would lead to £6 billion of improvement to the national economy, if we can get our lines working correctly through the Southern region. I say to the Minister that as part of this we need extra station capacity between Horsham and Crawley; I look forward to renewing my conversations with him in the future. Being able to help other Members is always an aspiration of mine. With that, I conclude my remarks.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The time limit will have to come down to three minutes. I was hoping every speaker could have given 20 or 30 seconds, but unfortunately that did not happen.

6.18 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As many Members have already suggested, our transport infrastructure plays a critical role in the functioning of our modern society, connecting our communities. I am particularly pleased to speak in this debate having recently taken on the role of chair of the Conservative Back-Bench transport group. We are planning to cover a number of wide-ranging transport topics from future rail connectivity following HS2 to the future of our shipping and ports following Brexit. Of course it would be remiss of me not to use this opportunity to invite the Minister to one of our future meetings.
[Jack Bretenon]

Data from the House of Commons Library clearly indicates a continuing increase in spending across all regions in England. Interestingly, my own region of the west midlands has seen transport spending rise from just over £1.2 billion to nearly £2 billion between 2011-12 and 2015-16. Upgrading our rail network so that it is HS2-ready, and ensuring the continuation of the roll-out of the national network of smart motorways, is at the heart of the midlands connect strategy. It is vital that HS2 is fully integrated into our existing conventional rail network, ensuring that the benefits of HS2 are maximised throughout our communities. More needs to be done to ensure that the opportunities of HS2 connectivity are not missed but are fully realised, so that places like Stoke-on-Trent are fully connected through direct classic compatible services on the HS2 network. Stoke-on-Trent must be connected as an HS2 city that succeeds in fully exposing the potential for innovation, creativity and development. The construction of phase 2a is likely to have a significant impact on the existing highway and rail network. Specifically, there is likely to be significant congestion at junction 15 of the M6. I encourage Ministers to look into this further.

As regards the work that is being done to improve our east-west connectivity, which a number of right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned, North Staffordshire’s Crewe-Derby line is essential if we are to see the upgrades to rail services in my constituency to Longton and through the city. There has been a 60% increase in footfall at those stations since privatisation, and that will increase as we move towards the economic potential that needs to be unlocked in Stoke-on-Trent.

I am very pleased that the Government are focusing on this reinvestment in our national transport infrastructure and creating the networks that will serve and champion economic growth. However, we need to continue to focus on how we can make the most of these opportunities for major investment so that that investment generates the greatest potential to deliver on housing and jobs growth in our constituencies.

6.20 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on transport. I am a member of the Transport Committee and I have a great passion for the subject. It took me over four hours to battle through the snow in East Sussex to be able to speak for three minutes in this place. Who says that this place is not maddening?

Transport is hugely important for my region. It has the ability to be an absolute game changer. Of course, any hon. Member can say the same thing about their constituency. We have heard lots of talk about the lack of subsidy in the north, for example. It is incredibly interesting that the average amount of subsidy spent per passenger kilometre in Great Britain is 5.1p, whereas in northern areas it is almost 25p. In the area I represent, where we have Southern railways, the worst performing rail operator in the country, the figure is only 1.1p. I dare say that there is a correlation between those two things. Hon. Members in the north who talk about their constituencies, enabling people to get to work and ensuring that elderly people are not isolated but can get to doctors’ surgeries, for example. The Community Transport Association and others have made me very aware of the potential ramifications of sections 19 and 22 of the Transport Act 1985 if there were changes. At present, there seems to be no safety ramifications requiring those drivers to have public service vehicle licences. I simply ask that the Minister and the Department do everything possible to ensure that community transport is able to function in exactly the same way as it does now and continues to provide that vital link, particularly in rural constituencies such as mine.

My second point is about the A40. Other hon. Members pass through it, and I am grateful for the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), whose constituency is affected just as much as mine. There are no two ways about it: my constituents spend hours a week stuck in congestion on the A40, which has untold economic consequences. West Oxfordshire and

6.23 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): In the three minutes available to me, I would like to make three brief points. The first point is about community transport. I emphasise what other hon. Members have said about this already. I have two shining examples in my constituency: West Oxfordshire Community Transport and Our Bus Bartons, which do a wonderful job in connecting our rural constituencies, enabling people to get to work and ensuring that elderly people are not isolated but can get to doctors’ surgeries, for example. The Community Transport Association and others have made me very aware of the potential ramifications of sections 19 and 22 of the Transport Act 1985 if there were changes. At present, there seems to be no safety ramifications requiring those drivers to have public service vehicle licences. I simply ask that the Minister and the Department do everything possible to ensure that community transport is able to function in exactly the same way as it does now and continues to provide that vital link, particularly in rural constituencies such as mine.

My second point is about the A40. Other hon. Members pass through it, and I am grateful for the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), whose constituency is affected just as much as mine. There are no two ways about it: my constituents spend hours a week stuck in congestion on the A40, which has untold economic consequences. West Oxfordshire and
other areas affected by the A40— the Members for many of those areas are here for this debate— will never reach their full economic potential until that road is addressed.

The A40 could be addressed in a number of ways, but one thing is certain: a final fix must be found, not just for economic reasons but for the quality of life of my constituents and others who spend hours stuck in maddening congestion along that road. Part of the solution is, of course, rail transport. There are two important stations in my constituency, Hanborough and Charlbury, and many small ones—Kingham, Finstock and Ascott-under-Wychwood to name a few. Those stations are all terribly important to the rural areas they serve, and making the most of them is critical to taking some of the traffic off the A40 by ensuring that people can get where they need to be for work or for personal reasons.

Finally, there are a number of solutions. We need to look at the signalling aspects so we can have fast trains—bimodal transport has been looked at, too. We also need to consider how we can make the most of what we already have, such as by tying in public transport to Hanborough station. Perhaps the Cowley branch line could be reopened to passenger services—a shuttle from Hanborough to Oxford would do a great deal to take traffic off the roads.

That was a quick canter, and I am grateful for those three minutes. The Government must take action in all these budgets.

6.27 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) for having the foresight to set up the new stations fund when she was Secretary of State for Transport. Some £6.6 million from that fund has contributed to the £9.9 million new station in Ilkeston, which opened just 11 months ago this coming weekend. The station has exceeded all expectations. Some 30,000 passengers used the station in its first three months, twice the number expected, and it has improved connectivity, attracted more businesses into Ilkeston and provided opportunities for my constituents to go to Nottingham, Chesterfield and Sheffield for jobs.

The station has also brought the community together, with the local school taking on and looking after the planting and gardening at the station. Two Santa steam train specials visited the station, which brought out all the people to welcome them to the station. Public money has a huge impact on our local communities when it is spent right.

My Long Eaton residents are going through the pain of having a smart motorway installed between junctions 23 and 25 of the M1 as part of the 30 new smart motorway schemes under the £15 billion investment plan. I have been reassured by Highways England that the scheme will help to relieve the pressure on junction 25, which is hopefully why my Long Eaton residents are putting up with it.

East Midlands Council and D2N2 feel that tinkering around the edges on the A52 will solve the pressure at junction 25, but we need to be bolder. That is why I once again ask the Secretary of State to be bold and brave and get a new junction between junctions 25 and 26, which would help to alleviate the problems of extra traffic caused by HS2 and the 2,000-plus houses we want to develop on the largest brownfield site in the UK.

While we are on the subject of HS2, it would be remiss of me not to mention and make a huge plea, yet again, for more appropriate and timely compensation for my residents who are grossly affected by phase 2b.

In my last few seconds, I give a plug to Erewash community transport. Only yesterday I witnessed how useful it was in helping to get disabled people and their volunteers from Leonard Cheshire Disability to the Ilkeston bowling alley, making sure those disabled people are fully integrated with the community. The social impact of community transport is so important. I am sure the Minister has heard that message loud and clear, and I am sure we will get an answer.

6.30 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I want to say a few words about the urgent need to support community transport providers. Those fantastic organisations do vital work to reduce loneliness and isolation, yet through no fault of their own they are fearful for the future. Community Connexions in my constituency is a charity with more than 30 years’ experience, and it provides a community transport service throughout Gloucestershire and beyond. It does so with the help of more than 50 local volunteers using accessible minibuses and their own vehicles. These are public-spirited individuals motivated by nothing more than a desire to give back to society. The impact the organisation is making is remarkable. For example, in 2016, more than 5,000 passengers were taken to health appointments and more than 13,000 passenger trips were taken to day centres. That was all done with care and compassion, with volunteers in some cases going literally the extra mile. By operating a number of community routes, it is doing work that the private sector is not interested in running. To give one example, it plugs a gap left by the market in the route from Cheltenham to the butterfly garden, a project providing education, therapy and recreation for people with disabilities.

I am of course aware that the Department for Transport is facing a legal challenge arising from the direct effect of EU regulations; it seems that the Bus and Coach Association is hell-bent on taking the maximum advantage through legal pressure and insists that there should be a level playing field, and what is not to like about a level playing field? But there is an important distinction here: community providers are not-for-profit, so any surplus they manage to gain through a contract is used to extend the reach of charitable community transport and therefore the scope for doing more good. So it is of course right that the Government respond to this legal challenge, but I hope they will do so in a way that is proportionate and does not fatally undermine the ability of community transport providers to continue as a going concern. I invite the Government to scrutinise with some care the suggestion that somehow community providers operate to a lower safety standard. I respectfully suggest that the evidence is not made out on that.

In short, I urge the Government: first, to move promptly to end the paralysis and uncertainty that is afflicting the community transport sector; secondly, to act generously on funding to assist community transport providers in
obtaining further permits for licences or additional training, as required; and, thirdly, to keep firmly in mind when addressing this the enormous social dividend and return to society that results from the work these organisations do. The Government must recognise that losing community transport providers would be a tragedy for some of the most deprived in our society.

6.32 pm

Mrs Keni Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Until a few months ago, I was a London Assembly member and I was always pleased to see the incredible amount of investment being committed by the Government to London. Anyone living in or visiting the city over the past eight years cannot help but have noticed the significant continuous improvement in transport infrastructure. However, I have been an Essex MP for eight months and I am somewhat less pleased when I compare the London numbers with those for my eastern region. Last year, in the east of England, just £74 million was spent on local public transport; my region received just 3.8% of the UK’s budget for such services over a five-year period.

I do think the Government have the correct approach to fiscal management, but I do not wish to see the community services adversely affected, especially those that make no demands on the Exchequer. It may therefore not surprise Members to know that I am one of the MPs who is speaking today on community transport. Uttlesford Community Travel currently runs under the section 19 and 22 permits set out within the Transport Act 1985. However, it is at risk of being priced out of the wonderful work it does in the area because of the high cost of training qualifications being mandated, so I am asking the Department to protect community travel services and their volunteers. Other Members of this House, including the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), have spoken about the great work these groups do in our constituencies and, most among them is Uttlesford Community Travel, in my constituency, which is run by Ian Shaw and Malcolm Barrell. I am here representing them.

Some time ago, I raised this matter in person with the Secretary of State, who was sympathetic. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) referred earlier to a Government letter of clarification, which hopefully will address the issue. I remain optimistic and hope that an exemption will be found for Uttlesford Community Travel and so many other charity transport organisations do. The Government must recognise that losing community transport providers would be a tragedy for some of the most deprived in our society.

6.34 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this new world of estimates debates, which means that instead of debating obscure reports we can talk about numbers and principles. The reality is, though, that many estimates are still going to be rolled up and voted on without debate. We are a long way from full transparency.

There are some increases in the supplementary estimates, and they are all reactive increases. There is £265 million to cover the HS2 VAT risk—just like that—yet the £35 million to scrap VAT for Scottish police and fire services was supposedly a Budget set-piece announcement for Scotland. Only last week, the UK Government voted down a review of the £140 million of backdated VAT that we want to be refunded to emergency services in Scotland. Will the Minister explain how that £265 million of VAT can be found so easily for HS2?

Some £5.6 million is allocated in the supplementary estimates for Brexit costs. That is going to be a drop in the ocean of what will be required. There need to be clear funding allocations as part of the Brexit preparations and there should be transparency about what that funding is for, especially if it is used in preparation for a no deal.

In my time in this House, the focus of much of the general transport debates has been on the whole north-south divide and whether London has much greater access to funding than other regions and nations in the UK. The bare figures back up the latter assertion: London and the south-east have between them shared more than 38% of the total spend over a five-year period. Such disproportionate spending creates either a vicious circle or a circle of prosperity, depending on how it is considered. Many of London’s transport projects have been used to drive the regeneration of areas, which brings further investment and jobs and thereby effectively sucks in more investment that could have been targeted elsewhere.

Even HS2 confirms the London-centric approach of successive Governments. There was no way that the UK Government was going to countenance starting in the north first or even, at the very least, undertaking north and south linkages at the same time. I certainly sympathise in particular with the north-east of England, which seems to suffer disproportionately. It also means that there will be some form of detriment to cross-border journeys.

Let us consider the Scottish total spend on transport over the past five years. At 13% of total UK spend, we are spending a higher amount per capita than the rest of the UK. On national road spending, Scotland is punching well above its weight. However, that is not because of the benevolence of the UK Government; it is despite the UK Government and thanks to the will of the Scottish Government.

Devolution has made a huge difference to the amount that can be spent on trying to alleviate the north-south divide. We need only consider the work that has happened since the Scottish Parliament came into being. Before that, we were completely at the mercy of the UK Government and suffered as a consequence. That alone is confirmation that power needs to be moved further and south first or even, at the very least, undertaking north and south linkages at the same time. I certainly sympathise in particular with the north-east of England, which sucks in more investment that could have been targeted elsewhere.

In 2009, the Scottish Government completed the upgrade of what was the last remaining single-track trunk road in the UK: the road to the islands from Fort William to Mallaig. It is truly astonishing that that was overlooked for so long. Things are the same on many of the Scottish islands, where there are single-track roads with passing places, interspersed with upgraded stretches that have been partly funded by the EU. That brings us back to the question of what the UK Government are going to do to plug the EU funding stream. What are they going to do when access to European Investment Bank loans dries up?

It took until 2017 for there to be a continuous motorway between Glasgow and Edinburgh. The Scottish National party Government have funded and completed the M74
and M80 upgrades, and we are progressing with the A9 and A96 dualling programmes. The fact that so much work has been done illustrates the historical shortfall. Some Opposition parties in the Scottish Parliament are crying out for more work to be done, but it is really difficult, especially as the estimates process is year on year. Barnett consequentials might or might not arise out of a given Budget—conversely, a cut could be imposed on the Scottish budget—so it is clear that the estimates process is still not fit for purpose. It is certainly not conducive to long-term strategic planning.

At no point in the budgetary process are the Scottish Government asked what their needs are so that decisions can be made on that basis. Yet we all know that the extra money secured by the Democratic Unionist party was apparently not a sop to the DUP; it was just that the UK Government were doing a needs-based analysis for Northern Ireland and suddenly discovered that it needed another £1 billion. Hopefully the other nations and regions of the UK will now be given the same forethought in the estimates process.

When it comes to rail funding, there is a process that should allow longer term planning and investment: the control period cycles. Previously, Scotland was allowed to access up to 11.2% of Network Rail’s borrowing capacity, based on the relative size of Scotland’s network within the UK network. Since then Scotland has actually built more railway lines, thanks to the SNP Government, but our allocation of funding has been proportionately cut. That does not make sense. Even worse, the UK regulator, the Office of Rail Regulation, has stated that Scotland needs £4.2 billion for essential repairs in order to meet future demand. However, without any warning the UK Government have allocated only £3.6 billion, leaving a £600 million shortfall. What is the point of involving the ORR in a proper, scientific estimates process if it is just ignored by the UK Treasury? I am yet to hear any Transport Minister stand up to defend the ORR and demand that extra money for Scotland.

It is impossible not to mention the rail franchising debacle. I have stated that the estimates process is not fit for purpose, and the same certainly goes for rail franchising. We had the west coast main line tender debacle, which led to the direct award to Virgin. We had the Southern rail shambles and too many direct awards in general. The Transport Secretary’s failure to get a grip of the Southern rail situation has cost the taxpayer £240 million in lost revenue, and that is a small drop in the ocean compared with the situation with Virgin Trains East Coast. The Secretary of State needs to get a grip of the east coast main line and return it to public ownership.

In conclusion, this is supposed to be a more transparent system that allows greater debate, but it seems to me that there is a long way to go. There is a long way to go before we have proper long-term planning: a long way to go before there is equitable spending, and not a bias in favour of London and the south-east; a long way to go before we have a Secretary of State who understands that private franchises do not generate magic money that the Government could not otherwise access; and a long way to go before we know the implications of Brexit. With the UK Government determined to hide the Brexit sectoral impact analyses, I am also concerned that the estimates process will continue to be a guesstimates process and that there will be a complete lack of transparency.

6.42 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for opening the debate. She made an excellent point about how central transport spending is to productivity and the wider economy—purpose, people and place, as we heard from the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes).

It is right to say that 2017-18 has raised many questions about the governance of public resources. Questions asked in numerous National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee reports have highlighted the Government’s failed stewardship of our transport system, as has also been highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins). While passengers have paid and paid again into the leaky finance pot, the failed leadership has ricocheted across industry, which has had to respond to frequent announcement of U-turns by turning on and off skills, on and off orders, changes to specs, cancellations and delays.

The Government have made a complete mockery of control periods on the railways and road investment strategies on the roads—processes that were designed to bring certainty have, in the hands of this Government, turned into chaos, and at a price. Only last week the Public Accounts Committee highlighted the numerous mistakes by the Department for Transport in its management of the Thameslink renewal programme. The Committee’s report was littered with examples of “careless mistakes”. Poor planning is systemic, and that is something I will return to.

Paragraph 2.12 of the “Memorandum on the Supplementary Estimate 2017-18” states that there was an increase of £65.7 million in the cost of the intercity express programme, attributed to “depot costs and contract variations.” That is bound to happen when the Government cannot decide what trains they want to run and keep cancelling rail infrastructure upgrades. Can the Minister tell us what impact these contract variations on the intercity express programme had on the east coast rail franchise? When were they due to come on line? What were the obligations promised under the franchise to the train operator? How were they communicated to Network Rail? We need answers. A parliamentary question on 20 February revealed that two variations in the IEP contract have taken place since 2012, with the last in June 2015. Why has it taken nearly three years for the costs of the variation to be included in the departmental budget?

This Government never fail to tell us how well the rail franchising system is working, but point 2.27 on page 15 of the memorandum states that the passenger rail income for this year is £248.6 million less than expected due to a decline in revenues received from train franchises including Thameslink, Southern and Greater Anglia. What is more, Her Majesty’s Treasury will pay an additional £60 million to cover the shortfall. It is yet another magic money tree—just wait until those leaves fall on the line, or should I say in the pockets of shareholders?

The Government caused the problems on Southern rail by refusing to take responsibility for the specifications included in its contract, leaving the hapless Govia Thameslink Railway to do the dirty work. Its approach
to industrial relations has caused misery to millions of passengers and staff—staff rightly making the case for the safety of passengers. I say “rightly” because the number of assaults on our trains is rising. This fall in revenues follows the Government’s multi-billion pound bail-out of Virgin-Stagecoach on the east coast and a sweet heart deal for the same companies on the west coast. We want the Government to come clean as to how much this will show up on the balance sheet. The public have a right to know.

Since 2012, the Department has granted 13 direct awards because it does not have the resources to re-franchise or the courage to take the contracts into public ownership. Why should the public continue to bail out a broken franchising system? Again, the public deserve to know.

Page 20 of the memorandum tells us that Network Rail paid train companies compensation to the tune of £339.4 million in control period 4. This is a disgraceful leakage of money from the rail system that could be used to fund infrastructure upgrades. This leakage is seen in the cuts to the electrification programme and rail upgrades announced by the Department last summer. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) has highlighted that the Department has wasted £50 million on the midland main line planning.

People, including my constituents in York Central, want answers as to where the money is going.

We have heard from Members right across the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), about the inequality of spending. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) called for investment in railways across the country. I look forward to the Minister’s statement tomorrow as the strategy on the peninsula rail taskforce is published.

This completely broken franchising system is managed by Whitehall’s third highest paid civil servant. However, since his appointment we have seen direct awards, franchise failures and a system in disarray. I note the £308 million of supplementary expenditure outlined in the memorandum, with no loci or accompanying strategy.

Turning to roads, we have also had the debacle of the unta xed road vehicles. The new system was promised to bring in £10 million a year. In fact, £107 million a year is being lost. It is a complete scandal, and incompetent stewardship has brought us to this point. I should mention road investment strategy 1. We have seen projects cancelled, 22 projects delayed and 19 enhancements pushed into the next control period—road investment strategy 2. We want to know what the Government are doing. Are they re-profiling RIS 2? Are they providing wider support for some of those Carillion contracts? As we have heard from the Treasury, £150 million has been put aside. Will the DTI be liable to pay out some of that? Time and again, the public are bailing out private failure.

I also want to mention the cancellation of the £250 million lorry park near Folkestone to ease Operation Stack congestion on the M20. It was cancelled because an environmental impact assessment was not done. That is more than just a careless mistake: it is a costly one, as the Government drive us off the white cliffs with their Brexit strategy.
to the permit guidance system to ensure that we comply with EU regulation and, where appropriate, that there is a level playing field between small commercial bus companies and permit holders. The Government have no plans to end the current permit system but, as hon. Members know, we are consulting to clarify which operators will require professional licences. We recognise that community transport provides a vital service in all areas of the country, particularly remote ones, which is why the Government have just announced £250,000 to assist drivers with public service vehicle licensing costs.

When we formed the coalition in 2010, the UK was one of the lowest spenders on infrastructure in the OECD. We had decades of under-investment in transport. We were making do with ageing assets, and we had a history as a country of cancelling important transport projects because of legal or planning objections.

One of the first decisions we faced as a Government was whether or not to cancel Crossrail, which we were being recommended to do by officials in the Department for Transport. That was because the economy then was in crisis and the new line would have required significant investment, but we saw it differently as a Government. We recognised that the Department for Transport has a fundamental role to play in the UK’s economic recovery, not just by channelling record investment into the network and improving public transport, but by building for the longer term, with the can-do approach recommended by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart).

We have embarked on the biggest rail programme since the Victorian era and the biggest road investment strategy for a generation. We have rebuilt Manchester Piccadilly, King’s Cross, Birmingham New Street and Reading stations. We are in the process of building HS2. We are supporting a new runway at Heathrow, and we are about to open the Elizabeth line.

Those are just the headline schemes. Crucial work is going on all over the country. The hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull North and for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) highlighted the need to correct, not reinforce, regional disparities in funding. This important debate needs to be informed by accurate figures, which is why I want to correct some of the misapprehensions about spending in the north and in the south.

Our analysis as a Government shows that over the four years to 2020-21, central Government’s transport infrastructure spending per head will be almost equal between the north and the south of the country, with the north in fact about £10 per head above the south. To get an idea of the scale of our investment in the north, we are investing more than £13 billion over this Parliament to improve northern transport. Up to 2020, every single train in the north of England is being replaced or refurbished.

Every part of the country will benefit from our investment programme, and I wish that I had time to dwell on other areas that are going to see benefits. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) spoke powerfully about the need for further investment in infrastructure in Essex. She is doing great work with her Anglian taskforce, and we are considering her proposals very carefully.

I want to pay particular attention to the far south-west, which had powerful advocates in the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris). The Secretary of State will not disappoint them tomorrow when he fulfils his commitment to respond to the Peninsula Rail Task Force with further details of the Government’s plans for Dawlish. I also want to tell my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) that we have received his bid for work on the north Devon link road and are giving it all the attention it deserves.

We are investing across the country. We are creating a major road network, funded by vehicle excise duty. We are allowing local authorities to improve or replace the most important A roads in their areas, and to tackle bottlenecks, reduce congestion and connect new housing right around the country. This Government are committed to transport infrastructure as no Government have ever been, and I commend the estimates to the House.

6.58 pm

Diana Johnson: May I first thank everybody who has contributed to this very good debate? I would particularly like to thank the Front Benchers. I hope that we will see action on regional inequalities, because I dispute the figures that the Minister cited. It is absolutely right that we see action on community transport. Given the inclement weather, I hope we will all tonight thank the people who work in our transport services to get us home safely.

Mr Speaker: On account of the fact that we do not take this Question immediately, and by virtue of the commendable succinctness of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), the House will recognise that we cannot immediately—that is to say now; to wit, at once—proceed to the next business. In fact, if I am candid about it, it is a consequence both of the succinctness of the hon. Lady and, as the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) helpfully reminds me through her gesticulation from a sedentary position, by virtue of the succinctness also of the Minister of State that we are in the position in which we find ourselves. I thought it might be helpful to the House to explain that matter.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

7 pm

The Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54).

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2017-18

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

Resolved.

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Ministry of Defence:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £8,852,638,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,363,500,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,703,385,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

DEPARTMENT FOR EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Resolved.

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Department for Exiting the European Union:

(1) the resources authorised for use for current purposes be reduced by £22,093,000 as set out in HC 808.
(2) further resources, not exceeding £650,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
(3) the sum authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £24,303,000.

MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Resolved,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government:
(1) further resources, not exceeding £296,942,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,
(2) further resources, not exceeding £484,352,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,618,448,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

DEPARTMENT FOR TRANSPORT

Resolved,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Department for Transport:
(1) further resources, not exceeding £268,829,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,
(2) further resources, not exceeding £753,858,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
(3) the sum authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £551,337,000.

The Speaker then put the Questions on the outstanding Resolutions relating to Supplementary Estimates 2017-2018, Excesses 2016-2017, and Vote on Account 2018-2019; and to adjourn the House.

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2017-18
Resolved,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018:
(1) further resources, not exceeding £146,208,006,000, be authorised for use for current purposes, in accordance with HC 786, HC 788, HC 796 and HC 808,
(2) further resources, not exceeding £12,431,023,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes, in accordance with HC 786, HC 788, HC 796 and HC 808, and
(3) the sums authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £7,361,664,000, in accordance with HC 786, HC 788, HC 808 and HC 809.

VOTE ON ACCOUNT 2018-19
Resolved,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2019:
(1) resources, not exceeding £235,886,869,000, be authorised, on account, for use for current purposes as set out in HC 773, HC 789, HC 797, HC 804, HC 809, and HC 811,
(2) resources, not exceeding £37,276,930,000, be authorised, on account, for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
(3) a sum, not exceeding £227,251,036,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading
Mel Stride accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the years ending with 31 March 2017, 31 March 2018 and 31 March 2019; and to appropriate the supply authorised by this Act for the years ending with 31 March 2017 and 31 March 2018.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 171).

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 10 to 12 together.

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

CORPORATION TAX

That the draft Enactment of Extra-Statutory Concessions Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

TRANSPORT

That the draft Renewable Transport Fuels and Greenhouse Gas Emissions Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.
Employment and Training

That the draft Industrial Training Levy (Construction Industry Training Board) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.—[Paul Maynard.]

Question agreed to.

Delegated Legislation (Information Commissioner (Remuneration))

Ordered,

That the Motion in the name of Margot James relating to Information Commissioner (Remuneration) shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—[Paul Maynard.]

Petition

Removal of Royal Mail Postal Collection

7.4 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I rise to present a petition about the removal of the Royal Mail postal collection box on the High Street in Cottenham. The petition states

“that the residents and Parish Council of Cottenham in South Cambridgeshire are adversely affected by the removal of the Royal Mail postal collection box on the High Street”

and requests that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should make representations to Royal Mail to reinstate a collection box in the vicinity better to support residents in this rural area. The petition also states that the petitioners urge the Ministry and “the Royal Mail to support the earliest possible re-instatement of a collection box in the central section of Cottenham High Street, one of the longest in England.”

This is an important issue for hundreds of my elderly residents, who rely heavily on being able to access a postbox in a rural location. I give special thanks to Audrey Brownlow and Councillor Frank Morris for first bringing this to my attention and for their tireless efforts. We look forward to a considered response from the Minister.

Following is the full text of the petition:

P002112

Petition

Declares that the residents and Parish Council of Cottenham in South Cambridgeshire are adversely affected by the removal of the Royal Mail postal collection box on the High Street, and further that the Department of Communities and Local Government should make representations to Royal Mail to re-instate a collection box in the vicinity to better support residents in such rural areas.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Royal Mail to support the earliest possible re-instatement of a collection box in the central section of Cottenham High Street, one of the longest in England.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her—I use this term in a non-pejorative sense—attempted point of order, and I am grateful to her for giving me advance notice. The reality, colleagues, is that the orderly conduct of business in a Public Bill Committee is a matter not for the Chair in this Chamber, but for the Chair in that Committee. I do not disregard or seek to rebut what the hon. Lady says about the logical course of events that could flow were this to be a regular practice, but nothing she has said leads me to believe that anything disorderly took place. It may well have been extremely vexing, and perhaps even a source of considerable consternation to the hon. Lady and others, but that is not the same as saying that anything disorderly took place. I have every confidence that the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), who I understand chaired the proceedings, would have ensured that that was so.

The Committee took a decision to adjourn its proceedings to another day, and the hon. Lady opposed that decision and found herself, in the process, in a minority. I venture to suggest—again, I do so non-pejoratively—that this is not the first time that that has happened. Conceivably, it might not even be the last. The hon. Lady’s brow is furrowed, and what I mean by that is that this will not be the only occasion on which she has voted in a particular direction and found herself outnumbered. It is quite a commonplace experience if one is in opposition. It may be that the hon. Lady’s concerns about the conduct of proceedings in the Committee on the Bill can be assuaged during their course. If not, I do not doubt that she will find her salvation during her contributions on Report, which I have to say I await myself with keen anticipation. I think we must leave the matter there for now. If the hon. Lady was in pursuit of an immediate resolution of her grievance, that might have been optimistic. This is the best that I can offer her at this stage.

We come now to the Adjournment, for which the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) has been so patiently waiting.
Eating Disorders Awareness Week

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

7.9 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Anorexia nervosa, a well-known eating disorder, has the highest mortality rate of any mental health condition. When eating disorders are not fatal, they can still lead to significant and long-lasting health issues. An estimated 1.25 million people in this country suffer from an eating disorder. Of course, it affects not just them but their families, yet eating disorders are all too rarely discussed in public.

We discuss with comparative ease physical illnesses that may devastate people’s lives, but when it comes to mental illnesses this is too often not the case. That is also true of eating disorders. Despite the ever-increasing pressures of daily life leading to increased instances of poor mental health, we still do not speak about these issues enough. These illnesses can thrive on secrecy. The longer they go unchallenged and unacknowledged, the harder it is to beat them. It is only by talking about them, bringing them out of the shadows that we can reduce the power they hold over those who suffer. To really improve the lives of those with eating disorders and prevent those at risk from falling victim to these illnesses, we must bring eating disorders, as with all mental health issues, to the forefront of the collective deliberations and consciousness of our society. That is why, in this Eating Disorders Awareness Week, I am very pleased to have secured this important debate so that we in this House, the centre of our national debate, can talk about it and play our part, however small, in raising awareness and making it that bit easier for others to talk about it. I am very pleased that this Minister is responding to the debate, because I know she is a lady of compassion, dedication and determination to improve people’s lives. May I also say, Mr Speaker, that with all the pressures on your time, I am pleased that you are in the Chair for the start of this debate, because I know the close interest you have taken in these issues as well?

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the outstanding compassion and professionalism of the community team and other professionals at the Brownhill Centre in Cheltenham, who provide such a vital lifeline for those suffering with eating disorders?

Edward Argar: I will. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) highlighted earlier today the work of the SEED—Support and Education for Eating Disorders—organisation in Penwortham in her constituency. They are both absolutely right to highlight the work of such organisations.

As hon. Members may know, since my election to this House I have on a number of occasions raised health and mental health-related issues on behalf of my constituents and more widely. In this case, last year I accepted an invitation from Beat, the national eating disorder charity, to the launch of its important report, “Delaying for years, denied for months”, which focuses on how long it takes from someone developing an eating disorder to their receiving treatment for it. It is a piece of research I will draw on extensively today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Over the years, a number of my constituents have had these problems. Through the good work of the NHS and the Beat organisation, to which he has just referred, they have been able to pull through to the other end. In Northern Ireland, we have some 20,000 people who suffer from eating disorders at any one time. Given that fact, does he feel that the Government could enter into discussions with the regional assemblies across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to agree a strategy that can accommodate where we are in the UK?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. That is one of those issues about which I would hope we can see the widest engagement across the UK, across all involved in government and the provision of services, to come up with a coherent and common approach to beating eating disorders.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good point. I wonder whether he has a feeling for how much extra training GPs will require to be able to spot the signs of these disorders.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes a very important point and if he will perhaps be patient for a few more minutes, I will turn to, among other things, exactly that point.

At the launch that I referred to, I met and heard from some impressive and inspiring people, who had grappled with eating disorders and who wanted to share their experience and raise awareness. I subsequently met Beat to discuss its work and what more needs to be done. The people I met at Beat’s launch event did something important and brave in speaking out, but they had already done something brave in seeking help for their illness in the first place.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): One of my constituents is an ambassador for Beat, and I met her recently. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the organisation’s strengths is that it draws on people who have been through the experience, so they can speak knowingly and convincingly to people—people they recognise as being in the same situation that they were in not that long ago?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is always true in any situation that someone who has been there can speak with much more power and in a much more compelling way than someone who has not, however empathetic they are. The reality is that the recognition of an eating disorder for what it is—an illness—and getting the help and treatment for it is, all too often, still too slow. With an eating disorder, as with illnesses generally, the earlier an intervention and treatment take place, the easier it is to treat and the better the outcome for the patient.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that mental health services require the ability to provide advice and counselling, especially to younger people, and that in many cases that is lacking?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Mental health services, whether they are statutory mental health services or supported services...
from the voluntary sector, have to be able to address the needs of the individual as an individual. I will come shortly to funding and the provision of those services.

Beat’s report last year found that the average cycle of relapse and recovery could be six years, and that it took an average of three and a half years, or 176 weeks, between someone getting an eating disorder and their getting the treatment that they need. That average of 176 weeks goes across people who are under 19 and adults. For those under 19, the average is 130 weeks, and for those over 19, the average is 256 weeks.

Those statistics are worth unpacking a little. It is important to be clear that 91 of the 176 weeks come before an individual or those around them recognise that they have an eating disorder, and a further 58 weeks come after that point, before they seek professional help. Increasing awareness of the symptoms of eating disorders is vital. As a recent YouGov survey found, 79% of the people who were surveyed could not list a single psychological symptom of eating disorders, and 34% were unable to name any correct sign or symptom. Alongside that, however, it takes real bravery for someone to admit to themselves that they need help. It is incredibly hard for someone to talk about an eating disorder.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this important debate to the Floor of the House. He says that it takes a lot of encouragement for people to say that they need help, and I commend the Government for their four-week target of 95% of patients to be seen within four weeks of referral. Will he join me in urging the Scottish Government to reduce the number of weeks from 18 weeks to four?

Edward Argar: I certainly join my hon. Friend in urging that. I daresay that were the Speaker to express a political opinion, he might, too, but of course, he cannot.

It will always take courage to talk about an eating disorder, but by talking about them in this House and in our communities, we can help to make it easier and to reduce the 149 weeks that I talked about. I hope that in the Minister’s response, she will set out what is being done to raise awareness and to help the national conversation to take place, working alongside charities such as Beat.

The remaining 27 weeks of the total come from an average of 11 weeks between someone first visiting a GP and receiving a referral, often with three visits to a GP taking place before that happens; eight weeks between referral and formal assessment; and eight weeks from assessment to receiving treatment. We can and should be able to further reduce this 27-week period.

Let me be clear: this is not, and should not be, a partisan or party political issue. Governments of different political colours have all made significant progress, but of course there remains more we can all do. When someone has made the important leap to talking about their illness and seeking help, it is at this time that they are most receptive to engaging with that help when offered. When they make that leap of faith, we must meet them with action.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I want to unpack what my hon. Friend has just said and pay tribute to the work done by all Governments on this important issue. Ultimately, however, pressure on resources sometimes means that people who seek help are effectively told to come back when they weigh less. That is at the heart of the challenge we have to address.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes an important point. One of the key themes drawn out from this and related research is that it should not just be one symptom or factor that determines when someone needs help; there is a basket of factors and considerations that demonstrates when that need is there and when treatment is needed. He is absolutely right, therefore, to highlight that point.

As we know, GPs do an amazing job, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, we need to ensure that doctors’ medical training gives them the tools they need in this area, as in others, to recognise all the symptoms of an eating disorder; and to ensure that that training is kept up to date and that medical professionals are familiar with and follow National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines on eating disorders, including its guidance that single measures—this touches on the point my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) has just made—such as body mass index and duration of illness alone should not be used to determine whether to offer treatment or what treatment to offer.

The Government have made huge strides in focusing on reducing delays through investment and funding and waiting-time targets, but these targets are not always fully applicable to everyone. As my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) set out, the Government have a target of 95% of non-urgent cases involving under-19s being seen for treatment within four weeks. I understand from the latest figures that that target is now being met in 79% of cases. That is good progress, but there is still more to do. It is vital, however, that these waiting-time standards for accessing treatment also apply to over-19s. I would welcome the Minister’s reflections on that, and, of course, I reiterate what my hon. Friend the Member for Angus said and hope that the Scottish Government will follow the very positive lead set in this respect.

More broadly, I would also highlight the waits experienced for child and adolescent mental health services and adult mental health services more generally. In some parts of the country—I have highlighted this in my county of Leicestershire—delays in treatment can have a profound effect on individuals and the families who care for them. I hope that the Minister will touch more broadly on that bigger picture.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I attended an NSPCC event yesterday where we were made aware that young people, despite accounting for 20% of mental health need, receive only 9% of the mental health budget. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that more needs to be spent on meeting young people’s mental health needs?

Edward Argar: I will come very shortly to overall spending, but part of that is not just the overall size of the pot, but how that money is spent and works its way through the system to reach the frontline. In 2016-17, we spent a record £11.6 billion on mental health services, and that amount will continue to rise year on year until 2020-21, by which point 21,000 new mental health posts
will be in place. This is all very welcome, and I commend the Health Secretary and his colleagues in the Department for it. Funding is vital. However, although £30 million per annum will be available over the next five years to fund eating disorder services, the way in which such funds are spent by clinical commissioning groups sometimes lacks transparency. At times it is hard to follow the funding from its source to ensure that it reaches the frontline. Implementation is key, and I hope the Minister will tell us how the Government are working to ensure that every penny reaches the frontline eating disorder services for which it is needed.

Community-based mental health services are often the most effective local services to help people, but they and in-patient mental health services are commissioned separately, by the CCG and by NHS England respectively. That can lead to a sense of a lack of joined-up care, and it can mean that people have to receive treatment many miles from their homes and families. That can place a huge strain on families, and, indeed, on family finances. Beat’s report suggests that in some instances the cost can be up to £32,000 as a result of lost earnings, travel and a range of other expenses. I believe that funds for eating disorder treatment should be held locally by the same budget holder in the same pot to create incentives for the development of improved treatment and reduced costly in-patient care, with CCGs working to extend their focus on early intervention to include the earlier stages of the illness.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Argar: Very briefly.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is making an excellent speech. Would what he is suggesting include support in schools?

Edward Argar: That is indeed very important. A key issue is the need to ensure that, as far as possible, there can be school referrals or, indeed, self-referrals as well as referrals made via a professional medical route. Some people may choose those ways of reaching out for the help that they need.

I hope that the Minister can update us on the progress of NHS England’s “Testing New Care Models in tertiary mental health services” pilot, which I understand is currently under way, and can tell us whether any initial findings are emerging in respect of the opportunity to put in-patient and community funding into a common pot.

I cannot end my speech without highlighting the impact that eating disorders have on the families and loved ones of those with the illness. Many of them care for people patiently and lovingly, and delays in securing the help that is needed can have devastating consequences for them. While in some cases it may not be appropriate, for good reasons, in many others, engaging those who are caring for someone receiving treatment—the “whole family” approach that I understand is used in Leicester, which will serve some of my constituents—can be hugely positive. I would welcome any reflections on that from the Minister.

Finally, I pay tribute to the work of Beat, which has campaigned tirelessly to highlight this issue, and to the work of those who operate its advice helpline. I commend its report to the Minister, and to all colleagues. However, I pay the greatest tribute to all those who suffer from an eating disorder and have had the bravery to talk about it, to seek the help that they need, and to face down an illness that depends on secrecy, isolates sufferers, and affects every aspect of their lives and those of their families. We must ensure that we match the courage of those who face it, determined to beat it, with an equal determination to give them the support, treatment and investment that they deserve. We must continue to drive down the delays and waiting times, raise awareness, and strip this disease of some of the power that it has over people by talking about it. We must stand shoulder to shoulder with all who face it, with the clear message that, together, we will beat eating disorders.

7.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) on initiating an extremely important and timely debate. I commend the sincerity and passion with which he has made his case. He has given me quite a long “to do” list, and I suspect that I shall have to come back to him, given the lateness of the hour.

You and I have attended many Adjournment debates together, Mr Deputy Speaker, and it is nice to see so many fellow Members here.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): In fairness, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is always here.

Jackie Doyle-Price: Indeed, and it is always a pleasure to see the hon. Gentleman in his place.

It illustrates the very real interest colleagues have in this important issue. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the work of the Department and NHS England in delivering on our commitment to better support people with eating disorders. As my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood said, eating disorders are both complex and devastating, and are serious life-threatening conditions with some of the highest mortality rates of any mental health disorder for many of the reasons he outlined: people often become so ill that they and their families do not realise how ingrained the problem is. These conditions can also have severe psychological, physical and social consequences, and they often start, and are prevalent in, young people, which is why early intervention is so crucial.

I will set out what we are doing to support children and young people, but that is not to diminish what my hon. Friend said about adults’ needs, which I will come to later. Having said that early intervention is vital, everyone with an eating disorder must have access to timely treatment. That is why we have set up the first waiting times to improve access to eating disorder services for children and young people, so that by 2020 some 95% of children with an eating disorder will receive treatment within one week for urgent cases and within four weeks for routine cases. I am pleased to be able to report to the House that we are making good progress towards that goal. The latest figures published in the mental health “Five Year Forward View” dashboard...
indicate that the NHS is on track to meet that standard, with almost 77% of all patients starting urgent treatment within one week and 83% of patients starting routine treatment within four weeks. That information is for the third quarter of 2017-18. We are making progress, but we still have to meet that goal. The number of people seeking treatment is rising, so we will need to make sure there is a commensurate increase in the ability for patients to get the care they need, as well as continue with our reduction in waiting times.

It is a testament to the work done by Members and Beat, and to the fact that there is greater general awareness, that more people are seeking treatment. Raising awareness and improving the understanding of eating disorders is important. My hon. Friend referred to community treatment, and it is our view that in-patient treatment should be seen as a last resort, which is why the Government announced in 2014 that we would invest £150 million to expand eating disorder community-based care. We are making good on that promise, and as a result 70 dedicated new or extended community services are now either open or in development. That will mean that at least 3,350 children and young people a year will receive swift, effective eating disorder treatment in the community.

The services are designed to give young people with eating disorders and who self-harm early access to services in their communities with properly trained teams. That reflects the fact that there was a lack of consistency, which needs to be tackled on a concerted basis so that we have fewer out-of-hours placements, recognising that the road to recovery is often quicker when people have access to their immediate family networks.

The services available include access to talking therapies, so that children and young people have a choice of evidence-based therapies, and a treatment plan agreed with their therapist and recorded outcomes, thereby avoiding the need for hospital stays. By improving care in the community, we can improve outcomes and recovery, and reduce rates of relapse or the numbers of young people transferring to adult services, which is another area of risk. We and NHS England want to make sure we have consistency in provision, and are investing in new in-patient care where there is seen to be a lack.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend highlighted the great work of Beat, and it is worth noting that the Secretary of State spoke at the launch of the Beat report and paid tribute to the young people who speak out. The bravery of those young people probably does more to raise awareness of eating disorders than anything any of us can do, despite our best intentions. Beat found that one in three adults in the UK could not name any signs or symptoms of eating disorders, which again shows we have a long way to go in raising awareness.

The Government understand the importance of increasing understanding and raising awareness. I will highlight some of the things we are doing in this area. First, we have published NICE guidelines on managing and treating eating disorders for everyone over the age of eight, including adults, children and young people. That guidance is available for healthcare professionals and commissioners who provide public services to people with eating disorders.

Secondly, we have set out ambitious plans in the children and young people’s mental health Green Paper, partly to address the point made by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). We are trying to create new mental health teams in schools, perhaps the earliest of early interventions, recognising that the earlier we can intervene, the more likely we are to avoid longer-term damage and crisis and to achieve better outcomes with people who are struggling. Some 8,000 new NHS staff will work closely with those teams in schools to deliver that enhanced support.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood said, we talk a lot about children but what about the adults? To further improve adult eating disorder care, we have developed a pathway, together with detailed implementation guidance for providers. That is in development by the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, in partnership with NICE. It is being fully informed by the available evidence and the views of experts, and will increase healthcare professionals’ awareness of the early signs and symptoms of eating disorders so that they too can refer their patients without delay.

Central to all this is the data collection that is being done by NHS England. My hon. Friend wanted to make sure that the moneys we are making available are actually being spent on the services on the ground, and that all clinical commissioning groups are delivering against their obligations. We are collecting that data. NHSE is undertaking a very close CCG-by-CCG analysis of exactly the pattern of care in each area so that we can make sure that everyone has access to prompt treatment and that we have consistency in access to provision.

Later this week, as it is Eating Disorders Awareness Week, I will be visiting the Bristol eating disorders health integration team—weather permitting, that is. This is a team of psychologists, academics, commissioners, care and support providers, and people with lived experience of eating disorders who are all working together to improve care and quality of life for people with eating disorders in Bristol. The team focuses on both prevention and treatment. If we can find examples of good practice and share them, we will go a long way towards achieving consistency of provision. I very much look forward to meeting those clinicians and experts-by-experience to see what we in Government can do to support them.

Again, I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the House. I am sure that this is not the last time that he will speak to me about this issue, because it is not the first time he has spoken to me about it either. I thank everyone for participating in the debate. I know that everyone here has a significant interest in mental health and those suffering with eating disorders. We all know that this can be the most fatal of all mental illnesses, and that every death is a tragedy. That is why we are very much committed to doing everything we can to combat this terrible illness.

Question put and agreed to.

7.38 pm

House adjourned.
Penny Mordaunt: We will take that opportunity, and others, to raise all those issues in the sessions with civil society and in the bilateral conversations that will take place throughout that week and in the run-up to it. We have set a standard, and we can encourage people to follow. Through DFID’s work, and through the incentives that we can provide, we can also provide other reasons for countries to do the right thing.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to identify those countries that criminalise people who are gay, but what about those countries that tolerate prejudice against gay people? What can we do in those cases?

Penny Mordaunt: There are several things that we can do to address those issues, one of which is to strengthen the voice of those organisations that highlight abuse and discrimination. The UK Aid Connect programme will do that. It will provide funding to civil society groups to help us to understand what is happening in particular locations and what is needed to address the issues.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): During the February recess, I spent some time in Uganda, which has an appalling record on the treatment of LGBT people. What is the Secretary of State’s Department doing to address that issue in Uganda?

Penny Mordaunt: The Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) is looking at these issues. We have particular requirements in funding agreements when working in particular locations, and where we see abuses taking place, we will not hesitate to raise them with the Government in question.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Today is the final day of UK LGBT history month. One of our nation’s lasting legacies has been the exporting of anti-gay laws around the world, and 36 of the 53 Commonwealth countries still criminalise homosexuality. The upcoming Commonwealth summit in April, hosted by the UK, is a golden opportunity for us to champion LGBT rights. However, reports in the Canadian press last week suggest that the Heads of Government communiqué is unlikely to mention LGBT rights. Will the Secretary of State consider what extra development assistance and funding she can now provide to LGBT activists and civil society across the Commonwealth, to ensure that we do not give up on change in the Commonwealth?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman should not be disheartened: we will still raise the issue. It is a strand of work that is going on. In addition to the UK Aid Connect programme that I have just outlined, I relaunched the DFID LGBT network at the start of the history week. Strengthening the support that our staff have to raise these issues—including staff who are LGBT themselves and who are required to work in-country—is vital to furthering this agenda.

Mr Speaker: I should advise the House that parliamentary business from, if memory serves, at least 28 Commonwealth countries are present in Westminster today, and possibly tomorrow, for a conference. That would be a heaven-sent opportunity for Members to seek to lobby those colleagues.
Internally Displaced People

2. Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What support her Department provides to internally displaced people.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): The UK is committed to meeting the needs of displaced populations, including internally displaced people. We are providing multi-year funding to support IDPs and the communities that host them through both humanitarian and longer term development programmes.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. The number of IDPs has risen by 10 million over the past four years to 40 million worldwide. What representations has the Secretary of State made to ensure that the UN negotiations on the global compacts for migration and refugees do not sideline the needs of IDPs?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this matter. IDPs due to conflict and violence outnumber refugees by two to one, but they have not received the focus or been given the profile that they need. In addition to the compacts that the hon. Lady mentioned, there are moves to set up a new panel looking at the particular and unique needs of IDPs, and the Department for International Development will support that.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Internally displaced people are some of the most vulnerable people in the world, and we have heard a lot recently about charities that are abusing those people. Has my right hon. Friend seen The Daily Telegraph today? It talks about the BBC World Service’s charitable arm, where sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour, which is totally wrong in this field, has happened under the watch of the director of news.

Mr Speaker: It is very wrong, but the answer must now focus on internally displaced people.

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is right to point out that one reason why we must be good on safeguarding and not dismiss such issues is to protect those individuals. The BBC did not report those incidents to us at the time, but my letter of two weeks ago prompted it to come forward with that information. That is a good thing, and we need to grip the problem and deliver for vulnerable people around the world.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Many thousands of people have been displaced from their homes in Syria. What is the Secretary of State doing to demonstrate to those people, and to every other civilian in Syria, that the British Government have not given up on them?

Penny Mordaunt: We have not given up on them, and we are working with the Governments of Jordan and Lebanon to provide people with support over both the short term and the long term. DFID recently moved its priorities towards longer term support for such individuals, and we remain the third largest donor to support them.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): In Burma, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have been internally displaced and some have fled across the border. What dialogue is my right hon. Friend having with the Burmese Government about the constant persecution of the Rohingya within Burma and the fact that they are being driven out by genocide?

Penny Mordaunt: With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I want to share my concern that the International Development Committee has not been given access to Burma, which is disgraceful. However, I can assure my hon. Friend that I have regular discussions with all parts of Government in Bangladesh and Burma about support for these individuals. It is vital that we get the Bangladesh Government to consider the medium term and breaking down the camp at Cox’s Bazar, and we are looking at our programme in both countries to ensure that displaced people are our priority.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The UN estimates that 6.1 million Syrians are internally displaced. With fresh fighting in eastern Ghouta despite the ceasefire, that number will continue to rise. What is the Department doing specifically to support displaced Syrian families in that particular region? Their needs and challenges are increasing with every passing day.

Penny Mordaunt: We have a huge number of programmes that are supporting those people in particular—not just the short-term needs of shelter, food and so forth, but education, jobs and livelihoods. Those individuals have some unique needs that have not been addressed to date with as much focus by the international community, and the setting up of a panel to consider those needs and what more we can do to help in similar situations will be a big step forward.

UN Relief and Works Agency: US Funding

3. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What representations she has made to the US Administration on their withholding funding from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): We are concerned about the impact on UNRWA’s activities whenever unexpected reductions or delays in predicted donor disbursements occur, and I raised that with a senior US official last week. Our officials are collaborating with the US and other donors to maintain UNRWA’s vital services across the region.

Alan Brown: The Minister will be aware that half a million Palestinian children attend schools funded by the UN Relief and Works Agency—schools that should really be funded by Israel as the occupying force. Has that been explained to the US Administration, as well
as the impact of the loss of $65 million of funding? Is it not time that Palestine was independent and controlled the resources?

Alistair Burt: It has been clearly explained to US officials what the impact of the funding decision may be, particularly in Jordan, Lebanon and other places where Palestinian refugees are supported. We have provided £50 million to UNRWA in this financial year, which assists in the provision of education and other needs, and we will continue to provide funding.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that while the agreement between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas about resuming electricity supplies to the people of Gaza is to be welcomed, the key to resolving the infighting and improving the lives of all Gazans is the disarmament of Hamas and the renunciation of terror and violence?

Alistair Burt: Yes. One cannot take the situation in Gaza away from the administration of Hamas and their failure to resolve issues in relation to Israel and to meet the Quartet principles. The people of Gaza have suffered from a number of different things and we continue to believe that only an overall settlement will assist their needs. We will continue to work for that.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): In 2016, the International Development Committee saw the brilliant work of UNRWA on education in Jordan. Will the Government work with other countries to make up the funding shortfall as a result of this outrageous cut by the Trump Administration?

Alistair Burt: We are working very keenly with other donors to get them to step up. I saw Commissioner-General Krähenbühl just last week in the UK and again at a recent conference. We know how much good work UNRWA does in the area. The education project the hon. Gentleman mentioned is particularly valuable. Other donors need to step up as well, and we will continue to provide as much as we can to meet those needs.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his answers. What representations has he made to UNRWA to make sure that it conforms to what the US Government wish to see, so that the funding can be restored?

Alistair Burt: I have spoken with US officials recently and other officials in relation to this matter. It is important that UNRWA’s work continues. It needs to be done and it does deliver good quality services. We will continue to provide as much as we can to meet those needs.

Palestinian Authority

4. Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that aid to the Palestinian Authority is not used to fund radicalisation.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): United Kingdom aid to the Palestinian Authority goes only to the salaries of vetted health and education workers in the west bank. Our memorandum of understanding with the PA includes a commitment to tackling incitement. I recently urged Palestinian Ministers to remain focused on that. President Abbas recently reconfirmed his commitment to peace and rejecting violence.

Andrew Rosindell: I welcome the Minister’s reassurance and the Government’s commitment to peaceful co-existence projects that bring Israelis and Palestinians together. However, last year the Palestinian Authority reportedly paid more than £250 million in monthly salaries to terrorists in Israeli prisons, which is worth 7% of their budget and an astonishing 50% of their foreign aid receipts. Those salaries directly reward terrorism. Does the Minister agree that those payments are abhorrent and must cease?

Alistair Burt: We have made constant representations to Palestinian authorities about the impact of any incitement to terror and payments to terror. The Palestinian authorities are well aware of our views and opinions on this matter. That is why no UK aid money goes to support terrorism or the families.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the 2014 initiative in which a tripartite committee was recommended, involving the Palestinians and the Israelis and chaired by the United States, to identify incitement from whichever quarter it comes and to tackle it? That was accepted by the Palestinians and the United States, but rejected by the Government of Israel. Does the Minister agree that that rejection was not in the interests of peace?

Alistair Burt: I am aware of the proposal and the possible initiative. In the region there is much need to do whatever is possible to bring people together to examine these areas. States have their own reasons why they may or may not agree to do so, but making sure there is more work on co-existence will help on this. We will therefore continue our work to make sure all parties know how important it is to resolve their issues, so that many of the things that have occupied this House over a lengthy period can be brought to a conclusion, in the interests of peace and justice.

Aid Spending

5. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps she is taking to promote value for money in aid spending.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): It is vital that aid spending delivers rigorous value for money and is well spent. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said that we must ensure it “cannot be better spent”. All projects are measured against a robust monitoring framework to ensure they remain cost-effective.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the Minister for that answer. I am sure she will agree that she constantly has to justify to the electorate the amount of money that is spent overseas. With that in mind, what steps are being taken to ensure that more of the equipment utilised is
British, that more of the non-governmental organisations employed to carry out the work are British and that the armed forces, where appropriate, are also involved in helping these projects?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the important role that our armed forces have played, not only in tackling Ebola in Sierra Leone, but in tackling the hurricane in the Caribbean last year. As he will know, the Secretary of State and I are both former Ministers in the Ministry of Defence and we are keen to ensure we work closely with our colleagues there.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I was concerned to read that £160,000 of the £5.8 million of UK aid spent with Venezuela was being used for training its repressive security services. I understand this was under review last summer, so will the Minister update us with the latest on that?

Harriett Baldwin: My understanding is that the small amount of spending that happens in Venezuela is to support human rights organisations and the British Council’s work on education. I shall certainly take back the hon. Lady’s representations to ensure that what she says is not the case.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her answer. How can we win back public support for what aid does if she believes that the best way of spending aid money is through the armed forces, and with more on outsourcing to the private sector and less on actual poverty reduction? Does she not see that that approach will only add a misperception to the growing doubt on who is best placed to deliver aid?

Harriett Baldwin: I am sorry that the hon. Lady did not welcome the amazing work we are doing through the delivery of international aid, through so many different organisations, be it in partnership, such as she seems to resent, with our colleagues in the conflict, stability and security fund or by working with colleagues in the health service on their amazing response to the outbreak of disease in camps in the Rohingya crisis.

Refugee Families

6. Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on enabling refugee families to reunify in the UK. [904083]

14. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on enabling refugee families to reunify in the UK. [904091]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): I regularly discuss refugee issues with Cabinet colleagues, including the Home Secretary, and with Home Office officials. We have committed to resettling 20,000 refugees fleeing the Syria conflict, and 3,000 vulnerable children and their families by 2020 from the middle east and north Africa, and we provide lifesaving aid, education and jobs to millions of refugees globally.

Marsha De Cordova: Will the Secretary of State urge the Government to back next month’s private Member’s Bill and put the humanity of migrants and the importance of family life at the heart of the Government’s immigration policy?

Penny Mordaunt: Obviously, the mandate resettlement scheme allows for that to happen, and there is no quota or cap on that. If we can improve things, I am always open to that on any issue, but I hope we can manage to do these things without primary legislation.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I suspect that most people would agree with the Home Affairs Committee when it said that it is “perverse that children who have been granted refugee status... are not then allowed to bring their close family to join them”. Does the Secretary of State agree?

Penny Mordaunt: It is loud in the Chamber, but I think the hon. Gentleman asked why children are not allowed to be joined by their parents. There are some solid technical reasons why we think that would be a bad idea, but I am looking into ways for us to get good things to happen. For example, the current Rohingya crisis has some barriers to good things happening in terms of identifying people and so forth, and we are working with the Home Office to address those issues. If the hon. Gentleman has suggestions, I would be happy to hear them.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming Refugee Action’s new Stand Up For Asylum campaign, which is launched today? It reminds us of the importance of providing a safe haven for those in genuine need.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for drawing attention to that campaign, which I welcome and look forward to reading about. We should be proud of the asylum system that we have, which protects individuals from around the world.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): The UK simply cannot speak with any authority on tackling the global refugee crisis until we get our own house in order. Time and again, the Government’s international development policy is held back by what other Departments are doing, including arms sales in Yemen, tax and trade deals that hurt developing countries, and a foreign policy that has forgotten human rights. Will the Secretary of State urge her Government to get behind the private Member’s Bill that is due to be debated in March and at least help to put an end to that particular contradiction and get refugee children reunited with their families?

Penny Mordaunt: In addition to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) a moment ago, the speech I gave at the Bond conference on Monday highlighted that we cannot do international development well unless we also do it in accordance with British values. I think we have a good track record as a nation and as a Government. I am always keen to see how we can make improvements, but I hope we can make them without primary legislation.
Topical Questions

T1. [904093] Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): On 20 February, I informed the House that I had asked all UK charities that receive UK aid to give me assurances on the safeguarding and reporting of historical cases by Monday last. I have received 161 responses, which my officials are now analysing, with independent oversight, and we have shared returns with the Charity Commission.

Unbelievably, a number of organisations have not replied. We are following up, but without compelling justification they will have lost our confidence and we will consider whether it is right to continue their funding. I will share my key findings, trends and themes in response to the safeguarding summit that will be held with the Charity Commission on 5 March, and I will keep the House informed.

Robert Courts: Is the Secretary of State confident that Britain will remain a world leader in humanitarian aid following our departure from the European Union?

Penny Mordaunt: Yes, I am. Although we will undoubtedly still work with European partners and ECHO, when we have further control over the money that we are spending, that will be a very good thing indeed.

Penny Mordaunt: We spend around £1 billion through our own health service and Public Health England, and into the Fleming fund and other research funds. Not only is the pioneering research that UK aid is funding saving lives overseas and developing ways to combat rare diseases, but the results are helping British citizens, too.

T2. [904094] Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is Rare Disease Day and we have been singing outside Westminster tube station to raise awareness. What is the Department doing to make sure that those who suffer rare diseases in developing countries are not left behind?

Penny Mordaunt: We are doing many things to provide support to those children, not just in the immediate aftermath of the situation they are facing, but in protecting them and ensuring that they do not fall victim to organised crime later on down the line. We are doing many things under the compact, and also in the new panel to which I have already alluded today.

Penny Mordaunt: My Department is assisting developing countries to improve waste management, which helps to avoid plastic ending up in the ocean, through multilateral funds such as the Global Environment Facility. We are also working closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on some new projects to identify what more we can do in line with the 25-year environment plan.

Mr Speaker: I call Liz McInnes. [Interruption.]

T3. [904095] Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I do not usually get that reception.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): On 5 March, I will share my key findings, trends and themes in analysing, with independent oversight, and we have received 161 responses, which my officials are now considering whether it is right to continue their funding. We are following up, but without compelling justification they will have lost our confidence and we will consider whether it is right to continue their funding. I will share my key findings, trends and themes in response to the safeguarding summit that will be held with the Charity Commission on 5 March, and I will keep the House informed.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Following on from my recent question to the Prime Minister on the Open Doors World Watch List, will the Minister consider earmarking a fixed minimum percentage of international aid to tackle religious persecution?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend deserves tribute for the way in which she raises this issue. In the 70th year since the United Nations’ universal declaration of human rights, it is a scandal that almost three quarters of the world’s population live in countries that restrict religious freedom. We do a lot in this area. Although we do not fix the percentage, it is important to respond to that need.

T4. [904096] Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Many of the Rohingya refugees are unaccompanied children at constant threat from traffickers. Can the Minister update the House on the support that the UK is providing to these vulnerable children?

Penny Mordaunt: We are doing many things to provide support to those children, not just in the immediate aftermath of the situation they are facing, but in protecting them and ensuring that they do not fall victim to organised crime later on down the line. We are doing many things under the compact, and also in the new panel to which I have already alluded today.

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that providing jobs and livelihoods for internally displaced people wherever they may be is equally as important as providing relief aid?

Penny Mordaunt: I do agree with my hon. Friend, which is why the Department has shifted its funding focus to those issues that are needed over the longer term, as well as to those in the immediate aftermath of a crisis.

T5. [904097] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Stability is clearly key to delivering aid in Yemen. The Southern Transitional Council appears to be providing some stability. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with it to secure the delivery of aid to both North and South Yemen?

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): The South Sudanese Government are preventing effective non-governmental organisations such as Christian Aid from providing aid to those who desperately need it in South Sudan. What more can be done to put pressure on that Government to allow such charities the access that they need?

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we hope that the appointment of the new UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, with his contacts right through Yemen, will help the peace process, which is necessary to end the conflict in Yemen for both north and south.

**PRIME MINISTER**

_The Prime Minister was asked—_

**Engagements**

Mr Speaker: I call Paul Blomfield. It’s your lucky day, man.

**Q1.** [904063] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 28 February.

**The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Paul Blomfield: Sheffield Young Carers is a group supporting inspirational young people who balance all the normal challenges of their young lives with the demands of caring for a parent or a sibling, often with acute needs—people such as John, who has been caring for his mother with fibromyalgia from the age of 10, or Phoebe, who has been supporting her father with mental health problems from the age of eight. They have some practical ideas about what the Government could do to make their lives easier. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet them and hear their proposals?

**The Prime Minister:** It is absolutely right for the hon. Gentleman to raise this issue. There are many young people who are caring for their parents and, sometimes, for their siblings as well. All too often they are going unseen and unheard. Certainly, one thing that we are trying to do as a Government is to ensure that we have more opportunities, and a greater ability, to identify and assess those young carers and their families, to support them and to make the rights of young carers clearer. I know that the Department of Health and Social Care is intending to publish a plan setting out our targeted cross-Government action on this area. I would be happy to meet a group of young carers and to hear from them directly.

**Q3.** [904065] Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I believe in a global Britain and I want us to trade freely with the world, so can my right hon. Friend explain the difference between a customs union and a customs arrangement, as there seems to be some confusion?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want to be able to have good trading relationships with the European Union, but we also want to be able to negotiate trade deals around the rest of the world with an independent trade policy. I was rather confused to hear a speech on this subject earlier in the week that I believe was given by the Labour leader. He said that he wanted Labour to negotiate a “new comprehensive ...customs union”. That would mean that we could not do our own trade deals and would actually betray the vote of the British people. But almost in the next sentence, he said that he wanted a “customs arrangement” meaning that we could negotiate our new trade deals. Well, that is the Government’s position. So what does he want to do—let down the country or agree with the Government?

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Good afternoon. I hope that the whole House will join me in passing our deepest condolences to the families of the people who died and those who were injured in the explosion in Leicester, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall). We thank all the emergency services and hospital staff who worked to save lives in that terrible situation.

The Prime Minister emerged from her Chequers awayday to promise a Brexit of “ambitious managed divergence”. Could she tell the country what on earth “ambitious managed divergence” will mean in practice?

**The Prime Minister:** May I first join the right hon. Gentleman and, I am sure, the whole House in expressing our condolences to the family and friends of those who lost their lives in the explosion in Leicester? I agree with him that we should commend the activities and work of the emergency services. They do so much for us all, day in and day out, but they really showed the great job that they do in dealing with those circumstances.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about the Government’s position on the European Union. It is very simple. We want to deliver on the vote of the British people that means that we will bring back control of our laws, our borders and our money. Of course, that is in direct contrast with the position of the Labour party, which wants to be in a customs union, have free movement and pay whatever it takes to the EU. That would mean giving away control of our laws, our borders and our money, and that would be a betrayal of the British people.

Jeremy Corbyn: I understand that the Prime Minister is going to make a speech about this on Friday, but I hope that she will address the concerns of 94% of small and medium-sized businesses that say that the Government are ignoring their concerns about how we leave the EU. Who does she think might be better at identifying the business opportunities of the future—the Confederation of British Industry, the Engineering Employers Federation, the Institute of Directors or the International Trade Secretary?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman talks about the views of business, particularly of small business. I refer him to what the Federation of Small Businesses said about our position:

“The UK small business community sees the potential wins of an independent UK global trade policy...we want trade kept as easy as possible with the EU27”—

that is our position—

“small businesses are pushing to export to new growth areas—the US, English-speaking nations, emerging economies and the Commonwealth.”
We want a good trading relationship with the European Union and free trade deals around the rest of the world under an independent sovereign nation.

Jeremy Corbyn: The International Trade Secretary says that business organisations and the TUC have got it all wrong, and that they do not know best how to prosper or grasp opportunities. I put it gently to the Prime Minister that they might have more of a clue than he has about the interests of business, jobs and living standards.

It is wonderful to see the Health Secretary here today. I assume that he was speaking on behalf of the Government last week, when he said:

“There will be areas and sectors of industry where we agree to align our regulations”.

He seems to know the answer. Will the Prime Minister enlighten the rest of us as to which sectors the Government want to remain aligned and which they plan to diverge?

The Prime Minister: First, the right hon. Gentleman said himself that I am going to be making a speech on these issues later this week. [Interruption.] Oh, just calm down. I have already set out in some detail the position that the Government are taking, and I will elaborate on that further this week. We want to ensure that across a variety of sectors—the goods sector, but also looking at issues like financial services which are such a crucial part of our economy—we get the relationship that means that we are able to ensure that we see that trade going across the borders between the United Kingdom and the remaining EU27 members, and that we have no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland; we are absolutely committed to delivering on that.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about people not having a clue. I will tell him who has not got a clue about business and jobs: a Labour party that wants to borrow £500 billion and bankrupt Britain.

Jeremy Corbyn: The endless round of after-dinner speeches by the Prime Minister on Europe does not really substitute for negotiations or for what is actually going to result from the negotiations.

One of the sectors already suffering very badly is that of health and social care. It is highly reliant on migrant workers. We depend on them for our health and the care of those who need it. Is the Prime Minister not just a little bit concerned that European Union workers with vital skills are leaving Britain in unprecedented numbers now?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman might have noticed from the last set of immigration figures, we actually still see more people coming into the UK from the European Union than are leaving the UK and going back to the European Union. We do have a care about the number of nurses and GPs that we have in the NHS. That is why we have set the highest levels of numbers of people in training for both nurses and GPs. It is why we have significantly increased the opportunities not just for people who are coming from the European Union to work in our national health service but for those people here in this country who want to work in our NHS to get those training places and do the excellent job that we know they will do for patients in our national health service.

Jeremy Corbyn: From a Government who have cut the nurse training bursary, who do not seem to understand that it takes eight years to train a doctor, and who are completely oblivious, apparently, to the fact that there are 100,000 vacancies in the NHS now—[Interruption.] I suggest that some Members get a life and go and visit a hospital to see just how hard those people work in order to cover for the vacancies that are there. Surely we need to give immediate, real assurance to EU nationals that they have a future in this country.

Just three months ago, the Foreign Secretary told the House with regard to Northern Ireland:

“There can be no hard border. That would be unthinkable”.—[Official Report, 21 November 2017; Vol. 631, c. 848.]

That is what he said. Yet in a leaked letter to the Prime Minister, he wrote:

“even if a hard border is reintroduced, we would expect to see 95% + of goods pass”.

[Interruption.] He is shouting at the moment—he is obviously mixing up the border with the Camden-Islington border. Can the Prime Minister confirm that she will not renege on commitments made in phase 1 to keep an open border in Ireland?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman actually raised three different issues in that question, so I will address all of them. He raised the issue of rights for European Union nationals. Of course, a key part of the December agreement—the December joint report that we agreed with the European Union—was about the rights of EU citizens living here in the United Kingdom and the rights of United Kingdom citizens living in the EU27. That was an important thing to have agreed at an early stage in the negotiations. We said we would do it and we did just that.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the number of nurses. Of course, there are now 13,900 more nurses on our wards than there were under Labour. He is talking about the number of years that it takes to train doctors. He said that it takes eight years to train a doctor. Well, if he is worried about the number of doctors there are now, eight years ago it was a Labour Government who were deciding the number of doctors that were going to be trained, so he can talk about that.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman referred to the position on Northern Ireland. The Foreign Secretary and I are absolutely committed to ensuring that we deliver on no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. That is the position of the UK Government. It is the position of the parties in Northern Ireland. It is the position of the Irish Government, and it was what we agreed in the December agreement of that joint report. We are all committed to ensuring there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Jeremy Corbyn: If that is the case, why is the Foreign Secretary in private correspondence with the Prime Minister about doing just the opposite of what was agreed in phase 1?

This is a Government in disarray. Every time the Cabinet meets, all we get are even more bizarre soundbites. Remember when we had “Brexit means Brexit”? Then
we had “red, white and blue Brexit”, which presumably appealed to Conservative Members. Then we had “liberal Brexit”, and now we have “ambitious managed divergence.” The Government are so divided that the Prime Minister is incapable of delivering a coherent and decisive plan for Brexit. When is she going to put the country’s interests before the outsized egos of her own Cabinet?

**The Prime Minister:** My priorities are the priorities of the British people. Yes, we are going to get Brexit right and deliver a good Brexit deal for them, but we are also building the homes that the country needs, so that people can own their own home. We are raising standards in our schools, so that our kids all get a good education. We are protecting the environment for future generations. That is a Conservative Government delivering on people’s priorities and giving them optimism and hope for the future, as opposed to a Labour party that would bankrupt Britain, betray voters and drag this country down.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Chris Davies.

**Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Clark, you are getting over-excited. I was calling Chris Davies, the hon. Gentleman behind you.

**Q4. [904066] Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): May I start by wishing you, Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister and the whole House a very happy St David’s day for tomorrow? I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for taking representatives of Riversimple, a leader in the field of hydrogen-powered automobiles that is based in Brecon and Radnorshire, on her recent successful trade visit to China. What are the Government planning to do to help regional small and medium-sized enterprises to make the most of potential trade opportunities with emerging markets once we leave the EU?

**The Prime Minister:** I was very happy to take a large business delegation with me on the trip to China, including representatives of Riversimple. It was a very good trip and very positive in terms of the connections and the deals that were agreed as a result of it. I can assure my hon. Friend that the Department for International Trade is working hard to support SMEs across the UK and to help connect exporters with buyers around the world. Of course, companies in the UK can access our overseas network and our programme of international events. I commend the work of colleagues around the House who are trade envoys, including my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who is our trade envoy for China and who also accompanied me on that trip. I am pleased to say that last year, UK Export Finance provided £3 billion in support, helping 221 UK companies selling to 63 countries, and 79% of those companies were SMEs.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): In 2012, the Prime Minister talked about “a future in which Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England continue to flourish side-by-side as equal partners.” Does she still stand by that?

**The Prime Minister:** Of course I continue to stand by wanting to ensure that all parts of the United Kingdom continue to flourish. I think the best way of doing that is ensuring all parts of the United Kingdom remain in the United Kingdom.

**Ian Blackford:** Of course, the emphasis was on “equal”. We are faced with a power grab by Westminster, and it is no surprise that the Scottish and Welsh Governments are putting forward continuity Bills to stop it. The Foreign Secretary’s leaked letter on the Irish border shows that he cannot get to grips with one of the most fundamental issues of Brexit. The Foreign Secretary compared crossing the Irish border to going between Camden and Westminster. Frankly, you could not make this stuff up, Mr Speaker. The UK Government are prepared to put in jeopardy the Good Friday agreement. Does the Prime Minister agree with her bumbling Foreign Secretary, who is making the United Kingdom a laughing stock?

**The Prime Minister:** First, this Government are absolutely committed to the Belfast agreement. Indeed, we made sure that that commitment was included in the joint report that we agreed with the European Union last December, so that commitment to the Belfast agreement stands. We are committed to the Belfast agreement and to the institutions under that agreement.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to devolved powers that are coming back from the European Union. We have also given an absolute commitment to amending clause 11, and that commitment remains unchanged. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has recently met representatives of the devolved Administrations. He put forward a further proposal for them, which would ensure that more powers are directly devolved to the Scottish and Welsh Governments and, in due course, to the Northern Ireland Executive. It was acknowledged that that was a significant step forward.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the continuity Bills. The proposals being put forward are unnecessary, and it would be rather more helpful if he concentrated on reaching an agreement in relation to the withdrawal agreement. We want to ensure that more powers are devolved to the devolved Administrations, and that is what we are going to deliver.

**Q7. [904069] Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Back in the real world, last year Network Rail paid out £181 million in compensation to train operating companies for cancellations and delays, but only £74 million of that was passed on to passengers. Why should train operators benefit financially from failure to deliver a decent service, when it is the passengers who suffer the aggro, inconvenience and cost? What is the Prime Minister planning to do to make sure that the money goes to the right place—the passengers?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, my hon. Friend is right that train operators are compensated. They are compensated when there is disruption on the tracks run by Network Rail, so the compensation is for something that has happened not as a result of what the rail operators are doing, but as a result of something that Network Rail is doing. We do ensure that there is also compensation available to the passengers who suffer from the disruption.
I am pleased to say that automatic payments are available from many rail operators, but not everybody can be automatically refunded. We are operating a delay repay scheme, which means that everyone, regardless of their ticket type, can have access to the compensation that they deserve. We want to ensure that passengers get the compensation that they deserve when their journeys are disrupted.

Q2. [904064] David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I ask the Prime Minister to reinforce her earlier comments, given the imminent publication by the EU of the draft legal text arising from December’s joint report. Will she confirm that she will never agree to any trade borders between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: We continue to stand behind all the commitments that we made in December, and my negotiating team will work with the Commission to agree how they should be translated into legal form in the withdrawal agreement. The hon. Gentleman is right: the draft legal text that the Commission has published would, if implemented, undermine the UK common market and threaten the constitutional integrity of the UK by creating a customs and regulatory border down the Irish sea, and no UK Prime Minister could ever agree to it. I will be making it crystal clear to President Juncker and others that we will never do so. We are committed to ensuring that we see no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, but the December text also made it clear that there should continue to be trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, as there is today.

Q13. [904075] Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Unemployment has fallen faster in the north-east than anywhere else in our country, which is tremendous news. The next step to put rocket boosters under the economy on Teesside would be to create a free port at Teesport. Will my right hon. Friend look seriously at this idea, which has great support from the Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, and from local business leaders?

The Prime Minister: When I visited Ben Houchen and Teesport, this was one of the proposals that they did put to me. I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming the fall in unemployment that we have seen in the north-east, and there are a number of ways in which we are providing that economic growth and ensuring that we see it continuing in the north-east. That is why we are investing £126 million through the Tees Valley local growth deal. My right hon. Friend looked seriously at this idea, which has great support from the Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, and from local business leaders.

Q5. [904067] Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Agents from the shale gas company INEOS recently posted a pre-named contract to my constituent Alison Davies, asking her to agree to a geological survey on her farm. Alison had already rejected this request when she was door-stepped a few days earlier. Does the Prime Minister know what it feels like to get an unsolicited letter from a group who will not take no for an answer, and will she join the Welsh and Scottish Governments by saying no to fracking in England?

The Prime Minister: Shale gas extraction could be a very important part of ensuring energy security in this country, and I am sure all the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and the constituents of others represented in this House will want to ensure the Government are doing everything they can to make sure we maintain our energy security and we do not see the lights being turned off.

Q15. [904077] Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is obvious that there will be concern about the draft from the EU of the withdrawal agreement. Can the Prime Minister assure me that when she responds, she will have uppermost in her mind the importance of both preserving and strengthening the Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. First, if I can reiterate the point that I made in response to an earlier question, we are very clear that we want to ensure that we are able to see that trading and that movement between all parts of the United Kingdom—that common single market within the United Kingdom that all parts of the United Kingdom benefit from. We are committed to protecting and enhancing our precious Union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The devolved Administrations should be fully engaged in preparations for the UK’s exit. They are—discussions have been taken from them—and as I said earlier, also in response to the Westminster leader of the Scottish National party, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), it is our intention that the vast majority of powers returning from Brussels will start off in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, not in Whitehall. We will continue to talk to the devolved Administrations, because we also need to ensure that we maintain the single market of the United Kingdom.

Q6. [904068] Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Last December’s joint report guaranteed unfettered access for Northern Island businesses into the UK internal market. Does the Prime Minister agree that the EU appears now to be trying to cherry-pick that agreement by ignoring such critical issues for our economy?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely clear—first, we do stand by the commitments we made in December, and the negotiating team will be working with the Commission to agree how we put that into legal text for a withdrawal agreement. Part of that agreement was, of course, that we will see no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Another part was, as the hon. Gentleman said, that there would be guaranteed access for Northern Ireland business to the United Kingdom market. As I said earlier, and I am happy to repeat again, the draft legal text that the Commission has published, if implemented, would undermine the UK common market and threatens the constitutional integrity of the UK by creating a customs and regulatory border down the Irish sea. No UK Prime Minister could ever agree to it, and I will be making that absolutely clear.
Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): May I welcome the Prime Minister's very firm reaffirmation of her commitment to the Good Friday agreement and the open border and to the December agreement that she made on the withdrawal terms, which included, if necessary, full regulatory convergence on both sides of the border? Does she accept that that means that, if necessary, there will be full regulatory convergence between the United Kingdom and the European Union?

The Prime Minister: At this stage, prior to my speech on Friday, may I perhaps refer my right hon. and learned Friend to the speech I made in Florence last year, which set out very clearly that we recognise there will be some areas where we will have the same objectives as the European Union and we will want to achieve those objectives in the same way, there will be other areas where we have the same objectives but we want to achieve those objectives by different means and there will be other areas where our objectives will differ? What matters is that it is this United Kingdom that will be able to take the decisions about the rules that it

Q8. [904070] Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): The roads in my constituency are in a terrible state of repair. In all my life, I have never seen such a mess. Small potholes are being left by Lancashire County Council to become big potholes, and in several cases these are merging to become trenches. The situation is dangerous for elderly pedestrians. Cyclists take their life in their hands. Motorists either damage their cars or swerve to avoid them. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is an unacceptable state of affairs, not least because of the failure to—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is very discourteous. The remainder of the hon. Lady's question will be heard. It is as simple and unarguable as that. There is no point people ranting from a sedentary position. The hon.

Julie Cooper: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is an unacceptable state of affairs, not least because the failure to make one stitch in time is leading to far more expensive repairs?

The Prime Minister: We all recognise the importance of the issue of potholes, which is why my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) raised it a while back and the Government put more money in precisely to deal with it. The hon. Lady talks about a stitch in time, but I am afraid I will not take any of that from a Labour party that when in government failed to mend the roof when the sun was shining.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Next week, we celebrate International Women's Day, celebrating the achievements of women globally. With a record of action on the gender pay gap, with more women in work and more childcare to help them, does the Prime Minister not agree that it is the Conservatatives while in government, with two female Prime Ministers, who are really delivering for women?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am happy to join her in celebrating International Women's Day. I want girls who are growing up today to know that they can achieve anything they want and that how far they go is about them, their abilities and their willingness to work hard. Female employment is at a joint record high. There are now 1.2 million women-led businesses, which is the highest since records began, and the gender pay gap is at a record low for full-time employment. That is a Conservative party in government delivering for women.

Q10. [904072] John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 28 February. Will the Prime Minister support the joint endeavours of 18 Conservative and Labour councils from Yorkshire, the Yorkshire CBI, the Yorkshire Institute of Directors, the Yorkshire TUC and His Grace the Archbishop of York in their efforts to get an all-Yorkshire devolution settlement by 2020, with the first directly elected mayor from God's own county?

The Prime Minister: We are committed to devolving powers to local areas where it will deliver better local services, greater value for money and clearer accountability. I am pleased to say we have already agreed an ambitious devolution deal with Sheffield city region. My right hon. Friend made, so that it receives the attention it deserves and is implemented as speedily and as widely as possible?

James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): May I welcome the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) back in his place.

James Brokenshire: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is very good to be back. Last year, I had the privilege to open the Guy’s Cancer Centre at Queen Mary’s Hospital in Sidcup in my constituency, not knowing then how relevant that might be to me. I pay tribute to the NHS and the outstanding people who work within it. My own treatment has been absolutely outstanding. I know that early diagnosis and early treatment is key. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend see that the lung health check programme, announced by NHS England in November, is implemented as speedily and as widely as possible? Will she do all she can to challenge the stigma attached to lung cancer and some of the false judgments that are made, so that it receives the attention it deserves and those suffering with the disease receive the care they need?

The Prime Minister: I am absolutely delighted to see my right hon. Friend back in his place in this House. I also commend him for the interviews that he gave over the weekend and the way that he spoke about his own experience. He is absolutely right about early diagnosis. The message that he gave from his experience needs to be one that we all promote around the country—if there is the slightest doubt, if something happens that you think is potentially problematic and the sign of something, please go to the doctor and get it checked out. There are many men, particularly, who think, “Oh no, well, you know, it’s better not to. We won’t.
We’ll just put up with it.” Actually, go and get it checked out, because crucially, in cancer and many other areas—but in cancers such as lung cancer, as my right hon. Friend said—if that early diagnosis and early action can be taken, it makes an enormous difference to the patient. I assure my right hon. Friend that we are looking very carefully at and monitoring the effectiveness, particularly, of the scanning of high-risk groups, and we will be looking carefully at the results of that. As he says, we need to ensure that we get rid of the stigma of lung cancer and that anybody who has the slightest suspicion of a problem goes to the doctor, gets themselves checked out and gets the treatment that they need.

Q11. [904073] Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): For many young people in the north-east, employment is precarious and low-paid. Since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, youth unemployment in Gateshead, my constituency, has remained stubbornly constant, while apprenticeship recruitment has declined by 35%. Having a plan to develop a plan is simply not good enough. What is the Prime Minister actually going to do to resolve the problem of youth unemployment in the north-east of England?

The Prime Minister: As we heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), what we have seen overall in the north-east is unemployment—

Ian Mearns: Youth unemployment.

The Prime Minister: Yes, but overall in the north-east, we have seen unemployment falling faster than in many other parts of the country, and that is to be welcomed. We do need to ensure that we are seeing the intended outcome of the apprenticeship levy—that is, more opportunities for young people—actually being put into practice. I am sure that my right hon. Friend who is responsible for the apprenticeship issue will take up the particular reference that the hon. Gentleman made to apprenticeships in the north-east.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): Last Sunday, we celebrated the achievements of Chichester-born astronaut Tim Peake by honouring him with the freedom of the city. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Tim and give assurances that our significant investment in the European Space Agency, EU space programmes and research will continue as we leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: This is an important issue. I was very pleased that one of the first receptions that I hosted in No. 10 when I became Prime Minister was for Tim Peake and I saw the enormous enthusiasm that he generated among young people for space and science. The joint report that we agreed with the EU in December made it clear that through the multi-annual financial framework, we will continue to participate in programmes that are funded by that, and that includes space, but we will also be discussing with the EU how we can build on our successful co-operation on space as the negotiations proceed. My hon. Friend will have seen that there have been some important developments, including legislation in this House, that will enable us to take a real forward position in relation to space in the future.

Q12. [904074] John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware that the huge new Midland Metropolitan Hospital in Smethwick is currently halted by the Carillion collapse. However, it is already two thirds finished and the longer the restart of work is delayed, the more the ultimate costs will rise. Yet only this week, more project management staff were laid off, so will the Prime Minister commit to getting this site back to work and instruct her Ministers, especially in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Treasury, to get a grip on this project, get the work rolling again next month and complete this much-needed hospital?

The Prime Minister: I understand that more than 8,000 Carillion workers have had their jobs safeguarded, but, of course, that is no comfort to those made redundant and their families. The right hon. Gentleman raises a specific point about the Midland Metropolitan Hospital. The Department of Health and Social Care and NHS Improvement are working with the trust and the private finance initiative company so that work can recommence as soon as possible.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that behind the smiling beard of the Leader of the Opposition lies the real threat to this country’s economy—the shadow Chancellor and his reheated, hard-left Marxism? Can she reassure me and the businesses of this country that the Conservative party will put jobs, prosperity and growth before ideology?

Mr Speaker: We are not going to talk about beards; we are going to talk about policy. We do not want to talk about the hon. Gentleman’s beard either; we are going to talk about policy, which I know is what the Prime Minister will address.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that if we want to build a strong economy with high-skilled, high-paid jobs for the future, the way to do it is not by borrowing hundreds of billions of pounds and bankrupting our economy. The Labour party would be a real threat to the economy of this country and—more than that—they would be a threat to the jobs of hard-working people up and down this country.

Q14. [904076] Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): This week sees the seventh anniversary of the 2011 referendum in Wales, at which the people of my country overwhelmingly supported full legislative sovereignty over devolved policy areas. Despite the perceived concessions in this week’s speech by the de facto Deputy Prime Minister, the withdrawal Bill will drive a sledgehammer through the Welsh constitution. Is it not the reality that under her plans for Brexit Britannia, Wales will be a rule-taker—a vassal country?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is wrong about our proposal for the devolved Administrations: we will be devolving far more powers to the devolved Administrations. Indeed, the Government did that only recently in the Wales Act 2017, which devolved more powers to the Welsh Government. We are absolutely clear that we want to see the vast majority of powers returning from Brussels starting off in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, not Whitehall, but we are also clear that
where powers relate to the UK as a whole it makes sense for us to ensure that they continue to apply across the whole of the UK in the same way.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): To celebrate World Book Day tomorrow, will the Prime Minister join me in backing the Share a Story child literacy campaign to make 10 minutes of daily reading with a child as much a national habit as eating five portions of fruit and veg?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming the Share a Story campaign and marking World Book Day, which is a day to enjoy and celebrate reading. As a child, I very much enjoyed reading, and the idea of making 10 minutes of daily reading with a child a natural habit for everybody is extremely important, and I would certainly support it.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Sunday’s explosion in Leicester has been a terrible shock to the local community, and I know that all our thoughts are with the families and friends of those who tragically lost their lives and those who were injured. I thank the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for praising our incredible emergency services, who continue to work in extremely difficult circumstances. Will the Prime Minister also pay tribute to our local residents, who have pulled together to support one another, showing great strength and courage, and will she make sure we get all the support we need to get to the bottom of what happened and to help my constituents put their lives back together?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady said, both I and the Leader of the Opposition express our condolences to the family and friends of those who were sadly killed in this tragedy, but we also recognise the impact it has had on the local community. I am very happy to pay tribute to local residents, who have shown the real value of community in the way they have come together, and I can assure her that everything will be done to get to the bottom of why this happened and to ensure, as far as possible—depending on the cause, of course—that it does not happen to anybody again.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Last year, I attended a meeting in the House of Lords organised by the wonderful Cross-Bench peer and human rights campaigner Baroness Cox, at which three very brave women told us their harrowing tales of how they had been treated and discriminated against by sharia courts. It is amazing how noisy feminists in this place are so quiet about this issue, given that women are being discriminated against so blatantly in this country. Is it not time that this alternative, discriminatory form of justice was no longer tolerated in this country?

The Prime Minister: Let me say to my hon. Friend that I believe that it published its report recently, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will respond to that shortly.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Organisations working with the victims of modern slavery report that tomorrow the Government will be cutting their miserable daily living allowance. Will the Prime Minister stop that cut?

The Prime Minister: I commend the right hon. Gentleman for his interest in the issue of modern slavery and human trafficking, and for the work that he has done to support all our efforts to stop this terrible and horrendous crime. Our benefits system is there to provide a safety net, and we have been introducing changes in order to give more help to the people who need it most. I am not aware of the details of the specific issue that the right hon. Gentleman has raised, but I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will want to look at it.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): A free, independent press is vital to our country. Does my right hon. Friend share my concerns about the links that Max Mosley has with Impress, and his links with some of our leading politicians?

The Prime Minister: I think some people will have been surprised to learn of those links with some leading politicians. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that a free press is very important: it underpins our democracy. Whatever those in the press say about us and whatever they write about us, it is important that they are able to hold politicians and the powerful to account and shine a light in some of the darkest corners of our society, and while I am Prime Minister, that will never change.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Edinburgh airport recently launched a noise abatement consultation. Given that aviation is a reserved matter, will the Prime Minister agree that her Government undertake an investigation of whether the level of night flights at Edinburgh has reached the level that was reached at Stansted when it was regulated?

The Prime Minister: I was not aware of the work being done at Edinburgh airport, but I shall be happy to ask the Department for Transport to look into the issue that the hon. Lady has raised.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am sure the whole House would agree that the value of peace is priceless. Will my right hon. Friend confirm her support for the Good Friday agreement, and will she confirm that it is safe in her hands?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. This April will mark the 20th anniversary of the historic Belfast agreement, which, together with its successors, has been fundamental in helping Northern Ireland to move forward from its violent past to a brighter and more secure future. I can assure my hon. Friend that this Government remain absolutely committed to the Belfast agreement: our commitment to that agreement is steadfast.
Mr Speaker: Thank you. Order. [ Interruption. ] Calm! I have said this before, but let me say it again. I encourage Members to seek to emulate the Buddha-like calm of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). He is modestly affecting not to notice what I am saying, but he is well aware that I am invoking him as an example of the repose and statesmanlike demeanour that colleagues should seek to imitate.
Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland: Border Arrangements

12.52 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs—who seems to have run away—to make a statement on future border arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland following Britain’s exit from the European Union.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): Mr Speaker, I have been asked to reply.

The Government have been consistent in their commitments to Northern Ireland as the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. First, we will never accept any solutions that threaten the economic or constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom. Secondly, we will not accept a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, which would reverse the considerable progress made through the political process over recent decades. That position has been consistent from the Prime Minister’s article 50 letter through to our position paper published last summer and the Prime Minister’s Florence speech last autumn.

Most recently, the Government enshrined both these commitments very clearly in the joint report we agreed with the European Union in December. That set out very clearly our “commitment to preserving the integrity of” our “internal market and Northern Ireland’s place within it”. It also included our “guarantee of avoiding a hard border” between Northern Ireland and Ireland, including any related checks and controls. These commitments were agreed collectively by the entire Cabinet, and I believe they have wide support across the House. Those commitments have not changed, nor will they.

Emily Thornberry: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and while I am always pleased to hear from the Minister of State, I have to say that it is an absolute disgrace, and a huge discount to the House, that the Foreign Secretary is not here himself to answer questions on the contents of his memo, especially given that we saw him in London a few hours ago jogging in the snow and stopping to answer questions from the media: if he can answer their questions, he really should be prepared to answer ours. What is he afraid of?

Perhaps the Foreign Secretary is afraid that these questions go to the very heart of his credibility and the credibility of previous statements that he has made in this House. On 21 November, from the Dispatch Box, I asked the Foreign Secretary whether he stood by the statement he made in February 2016—that a vote for Brexit would leave the border arrangements in Northern Ireland “absolutely unchanged”. He told the House in response—just three months ago—that he “repeated exactly the pledge...there can be no return to a hard border...That would be unthinkable, and it would be economic and political madness. I think everybody...understands the ramifications of allowing any such thing to happen.”—[Official Report, 21 November 2017; Vol. 631, c. 848.]

But last night, despite that clear public statement from the Foreign Secretary, we discovered his private memo to the Prime Minister on the same subject. In it he wrote:

“It is wrong to see the task as maintaining ‘no border’.”

The Government’s task is, he said, to “stop the border becoming significantly harder.”

But, he wrote:

“Even if a hard border is reintroduced, we would expect to see 95 per cent plus of goods pass the border” without checks.

Let us be clear what this memo reveals. Contrary to the Foreign Secretary’s previous statements, he accepts that there will have to be changes to the current border arrangements, and he accepts there will need to be border controls that do not exist at present; the only debate is their degree of hardness. Surely the Foreign Secretary has learned by now that you cannot just be a little bit pregnant: either there is a border or there is not.

My first question for the Minister is that the Foreign Secretary told the House that there would be no new border arrangements and no changes to the status quo, but this memo says the exact opposite, so which is the truth: what the Foreign Secretary said three months ago in public or what he said three weeks ago in private?

The Foreign Secretary has already said what we have heard so many times on this issue: that there is some magical technical solution which will allow goods to be checked, smuggling to be prevented, and points of origin proved as easily as paying the congestion charge and without—here is the truly magical part—even the installation of cameras. As I have pressed the Foreign Secretary repeatedly to tell us, how on earth is that possible, or is it just another addition to his ever-growing list of fantasies from ‘Boris island’ to the ‘channel bridge’?

I welcome the fact that the Foreign Secretary has already promised the media today to publish his leaked memo in full, and I hope that will provide some answers, but may I ask the Minister now—for the benefit of the House, and so that my colleagues can question him on his answer—to spell out in detail how this proposed invisible border will actually work in practice? If he cannot provide that detail, we are left with the conclusion that all of us on this side, and increasing numbers on his side, accept—that the only way to avoid a hard border in Northern Ireland is by staying in a customs union. The fact is that the Government know that—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are extremely grateful to the shadow Foreign Secretary, but she has now exceeded her time and we must leave it there.

Emily Thornberry: I have one further sentence, and then I am done.

Mr Speaker: Very well, but—[Interruption.] Order. I will be the judge of these matters; I require no assistance. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) is always willing to help and I am grateful to her for that gratis voluntary offer of services, but I feel able to cope...
without them. The Minister will have a suitable period of time to respond, and the shadow Foreign Secretary can now add one brief sentence.

Emily Thornberry: The truth of this memo is that the Government are saying one thing in public while preparing for the reality in private, and it is about time the deception was ended.

Mr Lidington: With respect to my right hon. and learned Friend, I do not think that there is a need for any misunderstanding about what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was saying. On the date when we leave the European Union, the treaties will, in the words of article 50, cease to apply to the United Kingdom. The effect of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which is currently before the House of Lords, is that the direct effect and primacy of European Union law in the United Kingdom will be extinguished. We are now seeking an agreement, which will take the form of a treaty governed by international law, between the United Kingdom and the continuing entity of the European Union. That is what we are seeking to do, and the Prime Minister has said that she will talk about that in more detail on Friday.

Stephen Gethins: Has my right hon. Friend seen the report prepared by the European Parliament’s policy department for citizens’ rights and constitutional affairs, which concludes that a technical solution allowing free movement of persons under a common travel arrangement and a low-friction border for the movement of goods will be possible, and that there is no reason why we should not start to implement that straight away?

Mr Lidington: The entire Government are committed to there being no border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, or between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Both those elements were central to the December joint report, and they are both firm commitments of the entire United Kingdom Cabinet and the Government. The hon. Gentleman’s strictures about the Government’s approach to jobs and employment stand somewhat in contrast to the reality, which is that employment is at a record high in the United Kingdom at the moment and unemployment is at a 40-year low.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: We have just heard the Prime Minister reconfirm her commitment to full regulatory convergence if necessary to keep the Irish border open, but I did not wholly understand the second half of her reply to me. Does my right hon. Friend really believe it will be possible to negotiate a position whereby the British Government decide what regulatory convergence they are going to have, the British Government decide what regulatory convergence they are not going to have, and the British Government are free to change their mind and move those boundaries at any time? What does my right hon. Friend think the prospects are of agreeing that with 27 other sovereign Governments?

Mr Lidington: The entire Government are committed to there being no border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, or between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Both those elements were central to the December joint report, and they are both firm commitments of the entire United Kingdom Cabinet and the Government. The hon. Gentleman’s strictures about the Government’s approach to jobs and employment stand somewhat in contrast to the reality, which is that employment is at a record high in the United Kingdom at the moment and unemployment is at a 40-year low.

Mr John Whittingdale: Has my right hon. Friend seen the report prepared by the European Parliament’s policy department for citizens’ rights and constitutional affairs, which concludes that a technical solution allowing free movement of persons under a common travel arrangement and a low-friction border for the movement of goods will be possible, and that there is no reason why we should not start to implement that straight away?

Mr Lidington: I have not had the pleasure of reading that particular report from the European Parliament yet, but I shall certainly add it to my reading list. What my right hon. Friend has just said is evidence that there are people here, as well as in the Brussels institutions...
and the 27 national Governments of our EU partners, who are keen to work constructively together to find an outcome that brings benefits to us all.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Instead of complaining that the draft withdrawal agreement published this morning proposes to keep Northern Ireland in the customs union and subject to the single energy market and to EU rules on the environment and agriculture, it is not time that Ministers finally accepted that it is their continuing failure to explain how they are going to keep an open border while leaving the customs union and the single market that is the cause of this problem? When will they explain how they propose to achieve that?

Mr Lidington: I draw the right hon. Gentleman’s attention to the fact that last December’s joint report contains three options to ensure that there will be no hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The first—which the Government of Ireland and this Government are strongly committed to and want to see as the option that we are able to deliver—is the one that settles this matter in the context of the overall future economic partnership between the UK and the European Union. We are looking forward to beginning the negotiating process that I hope will start after the publication today.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): We are coming up to the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement—an agreement that allowed the people of this nation, wherever they live in these islands, to have their own identity and yet be citizens of the United Kingdom. That agreement also locked in three conditions. The first was that the agreement could change only with the agreement of the citizens of Northern Ireland. The second was that Dublin would have to agree to a change, and the third was that the United Kingdom would have to agree. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that agreement must not be undermined, and that those who voted against it in the past should hang their heads in shame, because it is an agreement that has kept the peace for 20 years?

Mr Lidington: I am certainly proud of what the Belfast agreement has achieved in making possible a period of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. None of us would claim that that process was complete yet, but the Belfast agreement was an historic start that was attributed to the hard work of successive Governments under John Major and Tony Blair. I am happy to pay tribute to both of them for that. The Government are four-square behind the Belfast agreement, and my hon. Friend made an important point in talking about the principle of consent. The principle of consent, including over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, was also written into the joint report and signed up to not just by the UK Government but by the European Union as well.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I welcome what the Secretary of State has said in his statement and also what the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister’s questions. It is ironic that some of the people who complain the hardest about creating a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic have today welcomed proposals from the EU that would actually create a hard border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. The fact is that there is a border between north and south: a currency border. There are different currencies, different fiscal regimes, different tax regimes and different economic policies, but this is managed in a sensible and pragmatic way. The same can be done in relation to the future relationship. This has already been spelled out in the Government’s paper last August. To use the Belfast agreement—or, more despicably, the peace process—as an excuse either to thwart Brexit or to shape it in the way that some people want is quite frankly outrageous and disgraceful. Let us back the arrangements that are in place, but let us go forward in a pragmatic, sensible way and not create shibboleths that are not there.

Mr Lidington: I welcome what the right hon. Gentleman has said. Yes, there is of course a jurisdictional border that gives rise to tax and other differences, but they are currently managed in a way that allows people to go about their lives on either side of that jurisdictional border without any hindrance or delay whatever. This Government and the Irish Government are determined to try to ensure that that state of affairs continues, while also respecting the constitutional and economic integrity of the United Kingdom.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Of all the areas of the Brexit negotiations that give rise to high emotion, perhaps the one that most needs to be treated calmly, rationally and unemotionally is the question of the Irish border. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the UK Government and their negotiators will continue to deal with this issue in that calm, rational way? In doing that, could they perhaps persuade the Commission’s negotiating side to concentrate not just on one area of the December joint report but on all three areas that were originally put forward by the British Government?

Mr Lidington: I agree wholeheartedly with what my right hon. Friend says. His emphasis on all three strands is correct. It is important that there should be no cherry-picking between the different elements of the December joint report, and it is important that we should try to approach these matters in the calm, pragmatic way that he urges.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary claimed that congestion charge technology is the answer to border checks outside a customs union. However, he will know that the congestion charge checks vehicles, not what is in them, and that it includes 197 camera sites around London that no one notices, because they are in built-up areas, and that no one cares about because the last time I looked there had been a long history of peace between inner and outer London. In Northern Ireland last year, there were four attacks on the lives of police officers, 58 shooting incidents and 33 bombing incidents, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland has warned that any infrastructure at the border is a threat. Will the Minister for the Cabinet Office confirm that Ministers rule out any physical infrastructure at the border and that cameras are physical? Do they rule out new cameras at the border—yes or no?
Mr Lidington: We stand by the words to which we committed ourselves in December, which include no physical infrastructure at the border.

Anna Soubry (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I support everything that has been said by my right hon. Friend and the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green). The country has to wake up and realise that we are not going to tear our nation further apart. We need an approach to Brexit that is not only pragmatic but honest. The only solution to a hard border is membership of the customs union and the single market, and we will get there in the end.

Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about a democratic deficit? We know that 56% of people in Northern Ireland voted remain—I wonder why. In the absence of an Executive, and given the composition of the right hon. and hon. Members who sit in this place to represent Northern Ireland, where is the voice of the 56% in all this?

Mr Lidington: It is the Government’s hope that the political parties in Northern Ireland can agree to reconstitute the Executive and the Assembly as soon as possible. I think there is agreement across the political parties in Northern Ireland that that is what they want to do, and I hope that the remaining differences can be overcome.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Why does the Minister for the Cabinet Office think that the Foreign Secretary wrote this letter? Was it because he did not know that the Government had committed in paragraph 49 of the December agreement to “its guarantee of avoiding a hard border”, or was it because any commitment can be set aside in the service of the cause that the Foreign Secretary really cares about: the furtherance of his own career? Or was it something more sinister than Boris’s self-love, which is that faced with the incompatibility of red lines around the customs union and the single market and the commitment to no hard border, there is a concerted ideological attack on that commitment and, indeed, on the Good Friday agreement itself?

Mr Lidington: I do not think that I could be clearer than I have been so far. The Government are absolutely resolved to stand by both the Belfast agreement and all parts of the joint report of last December.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am encouraged that everybody seems to want to avoid a hard border in Northern Ireland. The only people who seem to be threatening such a border are those who are trying to leverage their political advantage in domestic politics in the Republic of Ireland or trying somehow to blackmail the whole of the United Kingdom into substantially reversing the substance of the referendum result. Far more constituencies voted leave than remain, and it would be as politically unsustainable for issues around Northern Ireland to leverage the whole of the United Kingdom back into some kind of customs unions as it would be to erect any wholly unnecessary infrastructure at the border in Northern Ireland.

Mr Lidington: We are at the very start of the negotiations about the detail of the withdrawal agreement and then of the creation of the future deep and special partnership that we are seeking with our European Union friends and neighbours. The depth and comprehensive nature of the economic partnership that we are seeking is something that the Prime Minister will talk about on Friday.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. This exchange is eliding into a debate, which it should not be. It is supposed to be a question and answer session, and I am getting enthusiastic nods of assent from the Minister for the Cabinet Office. I exhort colleagues to resist the temptation to orate. What is required is not oration, but inquiry, which will now be brilliantly and pithily exemplified by Lady Hermon.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): What a task—I will keep to it. Will the Minister take a few moments just to confirm to the House that the Irish Government have accepted that there will be no hard border on the island of Ireland and, just as importantly, that they have accepted that there will no border down the Irish sea?

Mr Lidington: The Irish Government, like the rest of the EU, signed up to and support the joint report of last December in its entirety, and paragraph 42 of the report commits both parties—the UK and the EU—to uphold the “totality” of the relationships embodied in and expressed by the Belfast agreement. That totality embraces east-west every bit as much as north-south.

Mr Speaker: Pithiness personified—Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What lies behind the European Commission’s partial decision to develop the options?

Mr Lidington: I am afraid that this is not a question that I can readily answer. However, it is important that the Commission recognises, as the Prime Minister said earlier, that as far as the Government are concerned, whichever side those of us around the Cabinet table voted or campaigned for during the EU referendum, our commitment to the Union of the United Kingdom is absolute. There is no division whatsoever on that matter, and I hope that our negotiating partners understand that.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I understand the clear frustration of the Minister and many Government Members at the Foreign Secretary saying that it is not his task to try to defend the border, but the Foreign Secretary said this morning—after his jog—that he would publish the memo. When?

Mr Lidington: We do not publish internal ministerial correspondence.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on not being provoked by the ridiculous statements coming from the European Union on this subject. I commend to my right hon. Friend the wise words of the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), because they show that
we can have a border with regulatory divergence, as there is at the moment. Why can that not continue into the future?

Mr Lidington: We are certainly seeking no hard border and, helpfully, the Government of Ireland are also committed to that objective. Having served six years as Minister for Europe, I am used to trying to resist provocation, wherever it comes from.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Foreign Secretary’s absence tells us all that we need to know about how accountable he feels he should be to this House. I must therefore ask the Minister instead why the Foreign Secretary was speculating about the Northern Ireland-Ireland border becoming “significantly harder”. What measures was he considering that might be necessary on the border?

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman served in the coalition Government, so he knows that Government business involves Ministers writing and conversing with each other all the time. The Government’s policy is the policy that has been collectively agreed by the Cabinet, and that is what the Prime Minister and I have set out this afternoon.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s commitment to the joint report. Will he confirm that it is Her Majesty’s Government’s intention to stick by the agreements that were outlined in paragraphs 49 and 50 of the report and that there is no intention to renege on any part of them?

Mr Lidington: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Will the Minister for the Cabinet Office confirm for the benefit of his Back Benchers, and perhaps the Democratic Unionist party, that the Northern Irish border backstop provision embodied in today’s draft EU withdrawal agreement is exactly what the Prime Minister agreed to as a backstop in December 2017? If he disagrees, will his Government produce an alternative text explaining what she did agree to?

Mr Lidington: What we have today is something that Monsieur Barnier has described as not necessarily the final version, because this is a draft that the Commission is tabling not for negotiation, but for discussion among the EU27 member states and the European Parliament. When the text comes to the table for negotiation, we will obviously consider that option. As the Prime Minister said earlier, it is important that there is not cherry-picking, and that the text of the withdrawal agreement, when it is eventually concluded, reflects all the paragraphs of the joint report equally. My feeling, from the brief reading I have had so far, is that the current draft does not do that.

James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I welcome what my right hon. Friend has said in pointing back to the joint report from just before Christmas, which underlined the commitment of the UK and the EU both to the Belfast Good Friday agreement and to the constitutional settlement of the UK. In that regard, will he confirm that the joint report highlighted that primarily, we need to focus on dealing with the Northern Ireland border through the broader negotiations, and will he encourage colleagues to focus on the August report that the Government published, which set out in detail how we should do that?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend gives some very good advice. We are certainly committed to taking the negotiations forward in that spirit.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster really wants a united United Kingdom, as we move forward with some of the most complicated decisions the nation has had to make for the best part of 100 years, is he not going to have to try to build a bigger consensus than just that around the Cabinet table? He is a fine parliamentarian, so does that not mean that he will have to turn round to his colleagues and say, “Yes you will come to Parliament. You will explain to Parliament what your views are,” and that he will have to say, “Yes, Prime Minister, just sometimes you will not make a speech somewhere else; you will make a speech about the European Union—the most important issue facing this country—in this Chamber”?

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Minister for the Cabinet Office replies, I advise the House of what I have been advised: namely, that the Prime Minister will make a statement on Brexit policy in this Chamber on Monday. That is extremely welcome.

I should just say, in the name of the intelligibility of our proceedings to people who are not Members of the House, that the decision as to whether to grant an urgent question is a matter for me as Speaker—two have been granted today because I judged that they warranted the attention of the House—but, as colleagues also know and others might not, the matter of whom the Government field to respond to a question is a matter for the Government. That is the situation.

Mr Lidington: I always welcome parliamentary consensus where it can be built, but if the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) looks at the Prime Minister’s record of being here, giving statements after her main European meetings and answering questions at length, he should agree that it is a pretty good one.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the European Union continues to put the cart before the horse on this aspect? Surely we cannot know with any degree of certainty what arrangements will be needed on the Irish border, if any at all, until we know what kind of trade agreement we are going to strike.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That is precisely why not just the Prime Minister but the Taoiseach believe that by far the best option is to settle the issue of the border in the context of the overall economic partnership between ourselves and the European Union.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): By leaving the European Union, we are taking control of our borders, such as that at Holyhead. The Government have also committed
to there being no border between the Republic and Northern Ireland. Can the Minister name any pair of countries where trade between them is regulated by two different customs regimes?

Mr Lidington: This is exactly the point that I made in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson): the right way forward is to resolve these matters in the context of the broader negotiation about the future economic partnership.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It is rightly the determination of the Government to deliver the current effectively open border, with the qualifications that were given by the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds). Surely all the people of the island of Ireland have the right for that same practical determination to be shared by the EU27, without it being taken hostage by conditions that would, in effect, override the sovereign decision of the British people to leave the European Union—an agenda that is rather transparently on display today.

Mr Lidington: As I said, we are at the start of a process of negotiation, not the end of it. I do not think the Prime Minister could have been clearer. No Prime Minister of any party who has served up until now, including my right hon. Friend, would countenance an agreement that led to a customs border between one part of the United Kingdom and another.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister has said that he wants there to be no border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. He has also said that he wants there to be no border between the integral part of the United Kingdom in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Wales, which I represent, has two borders: one with Northern Ireland through the port of Holyhead and one with the Republic of Ireland. What will happen in that situation?

Mr Lidington: That is precisely why this matter needs to be set within the overall arrangements. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will have noted the endorsement in the joint report of the continuation of the common travel area between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and the fact that that commitment was reflected in today’s draft text from the Commission.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Would it not be more sensible and logical if Michel Barnier focused more on the trade arrangements between the United Kingdom and the European Union, where the EU has a £70 billion surplus with the United Kingdom, rather than on just one part of the United Kingdom? If we only did that, we might obviate the need to focus on one part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Lidington: The trade surplus that the EU27 enjoy with the United Kingdom, particularly in trade in goods, is just one more compelling reason why it is to our mutual advantage to negotiate a future economic partnership that allows trade to be as frictionless as possible.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister is doing his level best to fudge the principal question: if we go into the negotiations with a view that there will be no hard border between the Republic and Northern Ireland and no hard border down the Irish sea, how do we begin to negotiate—which is the mechanism?

Mr Lidington: The mechanism is that which is set out in the joint report and in the Government’s various speeches and publications over the past 12 months, the latest of which the Prime Minister will deliver this Friday.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend has pointed out to the Irish Government that the biggest loser if there is not a sensible agreement and tariffs are imposed on Irish goods coming into the United Kingdom will be the Irish economy. There would be huge devastation to the Irish agricultural economy in particular. I wonder whether he has suggested to the Irish Prime Minister the question of whether he is willing to sacrifice the interests of the Irish economy on the high altar of European political integration.

Mr Lidington: The economies of Ireland and the United Kingdom are indeed intertwined, but I reassure my hon. Friend that the Irish Government and the Taoiseach are committed to trying to resolve these matters through option A, as set out in the joint report—namely, through the means of an overall economic agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Minister share my astonishment at the obsession that the Labour party now has with a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, when for years its leadership supported Sinn Féin-IRA’s campaign of genocide along the border, which led to border posts, Army patrols, watchtowers and closed roads? Does he agree with me that there are clear, practical proposals to avoid a hard physical border and that this pseudo-concern about the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic is more about undermining the referendum result and keeping us in the single market and the customs union and under the jurisdiction of the European Court?

Mr Lidington: The interventions by the official Opposition Front-Bench team throughout this week have been more about political opportunism than about principle. The way forward is to take forward the negotiations that will shortly commence in a calm, pragmatic spirit.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given that goods and services are routinely traded across land borders elsewhere in the EU, is it not possible that the political will to achieve the desired outcome is all that is needed? Will my right hon. Friend ensure that we do not sign up to what the EU dictates now but look at the creative solution that has been used elsewhere in EU borders?

Mr Lidington: I agree with my hon. Friend on that.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): This House has received assurance after assurance from the Government that there will be no hard border in Ireland, so why did the Foreign Secretary write in his memo that there was the possibility of such a hard border coming about?
Mr Lidington: The policy of the Government is the policy that has been agreed by the Cabinet, set out in our agreement to the joint report last December and expressed in the speeches that the Prime Minister has given throughout the past 12 months.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The European Union approach to sequencing these negotiations means that the Commission at the moment has a mandate to negotiate only the implementation phase, so these issues cannot be dealt with until after the end of March. Does my right hon. Friend agree that during this period the guiding star for us all has to be the fact that the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and the EU are all agreed that there will be no hard or physical border? Does he also agree that this debate is more about the shadow Foreign Secretary’s continued spat with our Foreign Secretary than anything else?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is spot on.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): From the Foreign Secretary’s comments, it seems that the Government are happy to contemplate a hard border with Ireland, which would be a disaster for Northern Ireland. Is it not now clear that the Government have been negotiating in bad faith with Ireland and the other countries of the EU?

Mr Lidington: I have sometimes felt that the hon. Lady’s party would be happy with a hard border between Scotland and England. I do not want her or anyone in the House to be under any misapprehension about this: the Government are absolutely committed to what they agreed in the joint report. Ever since the referendum, we have made it clear that we are not going to support a hard border on the island of Ireland.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain is far greater in volume than that between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, between Northern Ireland and the European Union and between Northern Ireland and the rest of the world?

Mr Lidington: Not only is that true, but trade between Ireland and Great Britain is more important than trade from south to north—between Ireland and Northern Ireland. That reinforces the point that it is in the mutual interests of all parties to agree on an ambitious economic partnership for the future.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that cameras count as infrastructure? Can he point us to an example anywhere in the world of an international border with no customs union and no border infrastructure? Can he provide one example, from anywhere?

Mr Lidington: The language of the joint report is very clear that associated physical infrastructure is ruled out.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the success of modern Northern Ireland can be seen in the fact that my friends, whose parents used to dread the school run, can now wave their kids off in the morning with barely a second thought? Will he assure me that all the options considered by the Government will be accompanied by a full security assessment?

Mr Lidington: A proper analysis of security will be undertaken by the appropriate agencies in any and all circumstances where that is required. My hon. Friend is right to say that one of the great achievements of constitutional politics in Northern Ireland over the past 25 years has been to bring about a measure of peace and security, after decades when people lived under the threat of terrorism. We should welcome that and re-dedicate ourselves to making sure that that process continues.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Secretary of State is in danger of forgetting that he is in the Chamber this afternoon for no other reason than the memo the Foreign Secretary wrote. Will he therefore answer the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and tell us why the Foreign Secretary wrote the memo to the Prime Minister?

Mr Lidington: As I said to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), in any Government, Ministers write letters and memorandums and have conversations from time to time. The policy of the Government under our system is the policy that is agreed collectively by the Cabinet, and the policy of the Cabinet and the Government is what I have set out today.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): May I associate myself with what the Minister has said and with what the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister’s questions about the inconceivable nature of the EU’s proposals to date? Does he agree that the evidence given by the permanent secretary of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to the Public Accounts Committee that a two-tier system, including a trusted trader scheme and derogations for small business, could help to avoid the physical infrastructure that we all want to avoid at the border?

Mr Lidington: Those items were also mentioned in the Government’s position paper that was published last summer about the Irish border. I am not saying that those will necessarily provide a comprehensive solution, but that is evidence of our good will in seeking pragmatic, constructive ways forward.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am sorry to say this, but the Foreign Secretary’s conduct in this has been deeply disrespectful to this place and deeply irresponsible on such a sensitive issue. Let me ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster something very clearly. In that memo, the Foreign Secretary wrote the words “if a hard border is reintroduced”.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has been clear about what the Cabinet position is and what the Government’s position is. Was the Foreign Secretary wrong to write that—yes or no?

"if a hard border is reintroduced".

The initiative’s contribution and interest of all parties to agree on an ambitious economic.
Mr Lidington: When Ministers have private conversations or private correspondence, they engage in all sorts of speculative thinking to test out ideas before they are brought for collective discussion and decision. The Government collectively are accountable to this House for the policies they have adopted. The Government have ruled out both a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and a border in the Irish sea.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How dare the EU propose the break-up of the United Kingdom into two separate trading zones? Some 61% of my constituents voted to leave, but both leavers and remainers are increasingly angered by the stroppy, petulant and unreasonable approach to these negotiations taken by the EU. Will my right hon. Friend tell the EU that it has not got off to a very good start in these negotiations?

Mr Lidington: What we learned at the end of 2017 was that all the predicates about the imminent collapse of the negotiating process at that time, with political will, both from London and from our 27 partners and the European Commission, an agreement could be reached. That provides a good basis on which to move forward.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Sir John Major and Tony Blair warned during the EU referendum campaign that this would be an issue, and I am sorry to say that what the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who is a serious person, has said today at the Dispatch Box is simply implausible. We are not talking about a Back Bencher or the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for paper clips; we are talking about the Foreign Secretary, who has a central role at the heart of the Brexit negotiations. He is entertaining, in memos to the Prime Minister, the prospect of a hard border, which the Minister for the Cabinet Office says has been ruled out. So the only question, which he has not answered, is: if what he says is the settled position of the Government, why is the Foreign Secretary setting this out in the memo? If the Foreign Secretary says he is going to publish the memo, when is he going to do it? If the Minister cannot answer those questions, should the Foreign Secretary not have had the guts to come here to answer for himself and clean up his own mess?

Mr Lidington: The Government’s policy is as I have set out. We are now, at the very start of the negotiating process, bringing forward ideas about how we would wish to give practical application to the commitments that we have entered into and developing them internally among the Government. The Prime Minister will say more about that on Friday.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): The differences in tax, economic strategy and, indeed, currency have proven to be no hindrance to the free and open land border. I recommend to my right hon. Friend that we give an absolute declaration that the UK will not, under any circumstances, implement a new Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland border. If the EU requires a new hard border, that is a matter for it and the Republic to decide and implement. We—unilaterally, if necessary—will honour the Belfast agreement and, indeed, strengthen the Union of the UK.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right to talk about the United Kingdom Government’s resolution, but in fairness we must acknowledge that the Government of Ireland is absolutely committed to trying to make sure that no hard border is created. The Taoiseach and his Government are committed to working with us constructively, as part of the EU27, to find a way forward in the context of a future economic partnership.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I live closer to the Northern Ireland border than anyone else in this Chamber. On this bogus issue of a hard border, do the Minister and all his Government colleagues, the Irish Government and the EU negotiators understand that any talk about a hard border, even in principle, is irrelevant because it would be totally and utterly impossible to police 310 crossing points? Even if that was tried, everyone locally would know how to circumvent them.

Mr Lidington: I am particularly conscious that in County Londonderry people commute to and from work, businesses supply customers and people travel to and from the doctors across the international jurisdictional border. For people to be able to go about their everyday lives, it is important that we reach the kind of agreement to which our Government and the Irish Government are committed.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend define for the House what the Government meant when they said that they would guarantee that there would be no hard border? What would such a hard border involve and what are we guaranteeing will not exist?

Mr Lidington: It is exactly what we said in our commitment to the joint report in December and in the position paper that we published last summer.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Last night, the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill—the first piece of contingency planning—had its Second Reading in the other place. Will the Minister clarify how the Government are going to ensure that there will be no checks on the registration for trucks and trailers between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland? How will that be consistent with the haulage Bill?

Mr Lidington: We believe that that Bill is completely compliant with our commitments under the joint report, but I shall ask the Secretary of State for Transport to write to the hon. Lady with the detail.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Good Friday agreement is an international multi-party agreement that was overwhelming endorsed by referendums on both sides of the Irish border. The decisions to leave the customs union and single market were taken by the Government unilaterally, without being put to any referendum anywhere. Does the Minister accept that it is entirely his Government’s responsibility to bring forward detailed, workable proposals on how his Government’s unilateral red lines can be made compatible with the multilateral agreement? How much longer do we have to wait before we see those proposals in print?
Mr Lidington: We are at the start of a process of negotiation. The hon. Gentleman would not expect this or any other Government to go into detail about their entire negotiating position. I hope that when he hears what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister says on Friday and when he has the opportunity to question her after her statement next Monday, he will feel reassured.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order normally come after urgent questions, but I think this one relates to the recent exchanges, so I shall take it now.

Anna Soubry: I am very grateful, Mr Speaker. Would it be in order for it to be recorded that, although in the exchanges on the urgent question, you quite rightly admonished a number of us for speaking for too long and not asking the short questions that some Members, but not all of us, are very good at, the reason why Members spoke for too long was that—I am sure you will correct me if I am wrong—we have never had a proper, meaningful debate or, indeed, vote on this or any other Brexit matter that would help the Government in their negotiations and reunite our country? This is just one of many examples of where Parliament’s voice is profoundly lacking in the whole Brexit process.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her point of order. There have of course been debates in the Committee of the whole House and Report stage on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, but outside of legislation, if memory serves me correctly, what the right hon. Lady says is factually correct. She will know that I have an unbridled enthusiasm for debate, for votes and for sitting in the Chair for extended periods listening to the intellects of Einstein and the eloquences of Demosthenes, which are so regularly on display from my colleagues in all parts of the House. I cannot get enough of it. It may seem eccentric on my part, but I love to listen to my colleagues. The more debates and the more votes, the better. I am most grateful to the right hon. Lady, of whose point of order I had only a moment’s notice, but which I enjoyed.

International Development Committee: Burma Visas

1.46 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to make a statement to the House on the Burmese Government’s failure to issue visas to members of the International Development Committee.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Like him, I am deeply disappointed that the Government of Burma have not granted visas for members of the International Development Committee. That displeasure has been communicated to the Burmese authorities. The Committee does vital work, providing oversight of UK aid programming in Burma and beyond.

The hon. Gentleman, who is the Chair of the International Development Committee, was due to travel on 27 February, with the rest of the Committee due to travel on 28 February. When no decision on visas was received by early yesterday morning, the Committee understandably cancelled the Burma leg of its visit. I understand that the Committee will continue with the second element of its trip, namely to travel to Bangladesh to review the Department for International Development’s work there, including support for the Rohingya refugees displaced to Cox’s Bazar and the vicinity.

My officials were informed this morning that the IDC’s visa applications had been formally denied. Burmese officials have indicated three reasons for the refusal: first, that there is an extended public holiday in Burma; secondly, that access to Rakhine state remains restricted for security reasons; and finally—I think the Chair of the IDC mentioned this in a press release yesterday evening—that they were unhappy that individual members of the IDC had signed a letter calling for the senior general of the Burmese army to be held to account for Burmese military behaviour in Rakhine.

It is right that the House takes a close interest in this sort of crisis, and I know that all Members present will continue to do so. The Government fully support the work of the International Development Committee and have been active in supporting this visit. DFID Burma worked closely with the IDC to develop a comprehensive itinerary covering a range of projects in-country. The British ambassador to Burma, Andrew Patrick, and other FCO officials pressed repeatedly for visas to be approved, both in Burma and through the Burmese embassy in London. I myself spoke over the telephone to the Burmese ambassador yesterday morning to raise the status of the visas. That demonstrates just how seriously the FCO takes this matter, not least as a courtesy to the House. I understand that you, Mr Speaker, wrote to the Burmese ambassador, and that he intends to reply formally to set out the reasons for the refusal.

Through DFID, the UK is one of the largest single donors to the refugee crisis in both Bangladesh and Burma. Our aid is making a big difference. The first tranche of UK funding is providing emergency food to some 174,000 people and safe water and hygiene to more than 138,000. Following a diphtheria outbreak in the refugee camps, we deployed the UK’s emergency medical team of more than 40 specialists to save lives.
This decision to deny visas is highly regrettable and will prevent the Committee from seeing some of DFID’s work at first hand. However, this Government must and will remain committed to supporting Burma’s poorest and most vulnerable people. Working with DFID, we will ensure that the Committee has access to all the information it needs to scrutinise the programme in Burma effectively.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the Minister. In democracies, parliamentarians do criticise Governments. That is a lesson that the Burmese Government will have to learn.

Stephen Twigg: Mr Speaker, thank you for granting this urgent question and for what you just said. I also thank the Minister for his response. On behalf of the entire Committee, I thank all those who have worked incredibly hard over the past few days to try to sort out this matter including you, Mr Speaker, who, as the Minister rightly pointed out, wrote personally to the Burmese ambassador in London; the Minister himself for his intervention, for which I am very grateful; the staff of DFID; and the team in Burma, particularly the British ambassador. Sadly, it was all to no avail. The Committee should, right now, be on its way to Burma where we were planning to look at some of the fantastic work that DFID funds in that country.

We were told last week that our visas had been approved here in the United Kingdom—they had been processed and were ready—but the Burmese embassy in London was awaiting final approval from its Government. Yesterday, our passports were returned to us without visas. Clearly, the failure of the Burmese Government to grant these visas simply prevents us from doing our job as a Select Committee, which is to oversee how overseas development assistance is spent in-country. I have no doubt that a major part of the reason this has happened is direct retaliation for the report we published last month on the Rohingya crisis. I believe that there is a direct connection between our report and these actions.

I thank the Minister for shedding some light today, in his response to this urgent question, on the reasons the Burmese have now given for denying our visas. I understand that it was Aung San Suu Kyi who blocked the approval of our visas. Some will argue—some have argued this overnight on social media—that, as a result of this, we should stop United Kingdom aid to Burma. I agree with the Minister that it would be a major mistake to stop supporting programmes that help the poorest—health and education programmes that make a difference for the very poorest people. We should not punish them. However, does the Minister agree that it is now the time for us as a Parliament and for the Government to review the programme for democratic change, which is working with the Burmese Parliament? If we as parliamentarians are not permitted to go to that country, meet its political leaders and look at how UK aid is being spent, we now need to review whether it is right that our taxpayers’ resources are being spent on parliamentary strengthening in Burma.

Finally, I believe that this incident is an attempt—the latest of many—by the Burmese authorities to silence opposition to their treatment of the Rohingya. Does the Minister agree that instead we must redouble our efforts on behalf of the Rohingya people to see that they get the justice that they deserve?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his thoughtful contribution—as ever—and for his kind words about the intervention of the Foreign Office. I accept his view: I think it is direct retaliation. I would not like to speculate on whether there had been a personal intervention by Aung San Suu Kyi, but we may learn more in the days to come, and obviously we will discuss matters then.

I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said. I say to him: please rest assured that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development in particular is working very closely to try to reorganise programmes that we have in Burma to take account of many of his concerns. Above all, there is a sense that we want to keep the interests of the most vulnerable at the forefront of our minds.

As I mentioned earlier, we are one of the biggest single donors in this terrible crisis. We have also given money to both the Red Cross and the World Food Programme to provide assistance in the northern Rakhine—in other words, on the Burmese, rather than the Bangladeshi, side of the border. To be honest, given the very severe humanitarian impact that heavy rains and cyclones could well have on the population—we are heading into cyclone season within the next month or so—this is something that we will keep under very open review.

I may have also said this, but I was in Brussels on Monday deputising for the Foreign Secretary at the Foreign Affairs Council. At the Council, we agreed the conclusions initating the work to introduce some targeted sanctions against elements of the Burmese military. This work is going on. Obviously, we are trying to do a lot at the UN. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate some of the difficulties we face in that regard, not least because of the potential veto of some of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, but we are also doing a lot at the EU level as well.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Having seen what has been going on in Rakhine, albeit a few years ago, I can say it is imperative that we continue to assist the Rohingya people in their hour of need. I urge the Minister formally to summon the Burmese ambassador to the Foreign Office to explain how seriously this House takes the fact that the Committee cannot go there to oversee what is the biggest bilateral aid programme in that country.

Those of us who have followed events in that country for some time now know that our policy was to support Aung San Suu Kyi where we could, and that we were always told that the problems were with the military. If it is now the case that she is no longer part of the solution, but is indeed in some way part of the problem, I think it is time to reassess our relationship with the Parliament in Naypyidaw, with the army in Burma, particularly with regard to the training and assistance that we have been trying to provide to make them a more democratically accountable military, and with the range of bilateral relations that we have had in that country. We simply cannot allow them to get away with this kind of behaviour.

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution. Obviously, he was a predecessor in the role that I now hold. This must all be very depressing,
[Mark Field]
given the high hopes that we had during the period he was in office. I can imagine that after the visits he made to Burma at that time, there was a sense that, after decades of military rule, we were moving towards some sort of democracy. In many ways, to be absolutely honest, there are some lessons that we have learned. There was perhaps a small amount of democracy, but, as many will be aware, the Rohingya were not included in the census and they were not allowed to vote in the elections, and in many ways we are seeing elements that are the consequences of that, so there are great lessons to learn.

In relation to my right hon. Friend’s initial point about the Burmese ambassador, we will of course summon him, probably over the next week, to express our deep displeasure at his Government’s action.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The refusal of visas for the International Development Committee by the Myanmar Government is obviously shocking. It seems to be a response to the Committee’s critical report on the situation of the Rohingya, although it might also be a response to the tightening of EU sanctions, which the Minister mentioned. Banning people seems to be the Burmese Government’s stock response to criticism: they have also banned the UN fact-finding mission, the special rapporteur, and the UN Refugee Agency. The UK has a £100 million aid programme and significant development investments, and we have our own parliamentary strengthening programme. It is completely reasonable for the International Development Committee to visit Myanmar to see how these are going. The Chair is right to say that we need to think again about the parliamentary strengthening programme, but what is the Foreign Office going to do to secure access both for British parliamentarians and for the United Nations agencies?

**Mark Field**: The hon. Lady will appreciate that these are very difficult issues. We are doing our best to work bilaterally and within the international community to secure that sort of access. We are also working quietly behind the scenes. Individuals known to Aung San Suu Kyi over many years have paid visits to Naypyidaw at least to advise her of the displeasure and concerns of the international community. As I think we both agree, the truth really is that the military to a very large extent have the whip hand in all that is going on in Burma.

We will continue to work tirelessly to ensure that we move forwards. We want to see some accountability for the crimes that have been committed. The UN fact-finding mission will come forward with an interim report in the weeks to come. With Mr Speaker’s permission, I hope that we will then have a statement in the House setting out our position regarding the issue of impunity for the future.

I return to my initial point and the point made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg). It is my strong belief that we have always to remember that, frustrating though this situation is, the work done for the most vulnerable must continue. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) pointed out that we spend £100 million a year on aid in Burma. It would be perhaps very easy for us to walk away. To be absolutely honest, we want to try to find more moderate elements within the military that we can begin to work with. We have stopped programmes of training for the military, but we are open-minded. If there are individuals with whom we feel that we should try to keep lines of communication open, we will continue to do so. In many ways, this is one of the frustrations of democracy and diplomacy, but we will continue our work patiently—although with some urgency, for the reasons that I have set out and given the humanitarian catastrophe that is taking place on the Bangladeshi side of the border.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Mr Speaker, your own role was instrumental in setting up that parliamentary strengthening programme, the purpose of which is to make Burma’s Parliament more like ours. Therefore, it would be folly to stop it, no matter how insulted we properly feel.

**Mark Field**: I share my right hon. Friend’s concerns. During the previous Parliament, I was part of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and played a role in working together with the Burmese Parliament. We do have integrated programmes. On a cross-party basis, I think, we would not wish to desert—in perhaps Burma’s biggest hour of need—some elements in the country who feel strongly about this matter. Equally, my right hon. Friend will recognise the deep concern that we cannot continue as though it is business as usual in all our relations with the Burmese authorities. I very much hope that we will be able to work with some individuals to make that country a better and more democratic place in the years to come.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): It goes without saying how deeply disappointed I am to be in this Chamber along with my International Development Committee colleagues, when we were supposed to be on a planned flight to Burma to see the good work that DFID is doing in the area. It is also with bitter disappointment that I found out just now that Aung San Suu Kyi is personally responsible for blocking the visas for us to see the essential work that we are providing to the poorest and most vulnerable of her citizens in her nation. DFID has a substantial aid programme in Burma, and our job is to go out there to see the good work that is being done. It is with a heavy heart—that, as the Member of Parliament for Dundee city, I feel that I will have to recommend the withdrawal of Aung San Suu Kyi’s freedom of the city.

Will the Minister tell me what assurances can be given for future visits to Burma to see the essential work that has been carried out by DFID in the regions, including in Rakhine state? Will he give us an opportunity to seek a further, more detailed explanation, given the fact that we are a democracy that has supported democracy in Burma, particularly Aung San Suu Kyi? I signed the letter mentioned previously and I would endorse anybody else signing it. If war crimes and mass atrocities have been carried out in Rakhine state, it is for all democracies to make their voice heard. Aung San Suu Kyi has been championing democracy in Burma for over 20 years. I hope that she is listening well to this message today, because she should also be speaking out. If any costs have been incurred by this Parliament and lost as a
result of the cancellation of this trip, they should be refunded. Lastly, I ask for an apology from the Burmese authorities.

**Mark Field:** The hon. Gentleman and I spoke earlier this morning, before the disappointment when it became apparent that the Burmese authorities’ refusal was in place. I wish him and the rest of the Committee all the best in being able to see as much as they can in Bangladesh, but it is a depressing situation, as it would have been more worthwhile for Committee members to have visited Sittwe in Rakhine state, which is where they intended to be.

It is not that I want to defend Aung San Suu Kyi, but equally we have a bilateral relationship and are trying to keep lines of communication open. The recognition has to be that it is the Burmese military that has been responsible for many of the atrocities that have taken place in the aftermath of 25 August. We should not forget that point amidst the great disappointment that is shared by many Members of Parliament, given the great high hopes they had for the new regime when it came into play only a couple of years ago.

On issues of accountability, the immediate task will be to support those who are building evidence and testimony. That task has been ongoing over the past six months. A range of non-governmental organisations is already collecting that testimony, and we are considering how best we can support them. Burma is not a party to the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court. Consequently, the ICC would only have jurisdiction over the alleged crime if Burma were to refer itself to the court—an unlikely scenario—or if there were a referral by the UN Security Council, which is also unlikely given the reasons that I have mentioned. We are working through a strategy on impunity and accountability for those who have committed some of these terrible crimes, and hope to come back to the House regarding that before too long.

**Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con):** As a member of the Committee, I am deeply disappointed that we are not going, mainly because we were trying to see how these terribly vulnerable people are being treated on both the Burmese side and the Bangladeshi side. The Bangladesh side is doing a magnificent job in difficult circumstances. We needed to see what DFID is spending the money on and how it is doing that. We recognised that there was a bank holiday and that it was quite dangerous to go to Burma, but we were prepared to go if we possibly could. Now we have been thwarted. I do not know whether there is truth in the statement that Aung San Suu Kyi had a hand in this, but I hope that the Minister will ask, find out and report back to this House because it is an incredibly serious matter. I have admired Aung San Suu Kyi before, as have many millions of people in this country, but the shine will definitely have gone off her halo if she did have a hand in this.

**Mark Field:** We will do our level best to get to the bottom of exactly what has happened and who is responsible. When parliamentarians visit other countries, we are often teased by our constituents, who say that we are just heading off on one big jolly. Many will know I was a very new Minister when I first came to speak on these matters of tragedy in the early part of September, and for my own part my two visits to Burma—to Sittwe in Rakhine, as well as to Rangoon and Naypyidaw—and the opportunity I had to visit Bangladesh have made an immense difference to my understanding of the situation. The work done there is invaluable and visiting really puts that into perspective. A Committee such as this one, which is rightly holding a Government Department to account, needs to be able to see the work being done on the ground.

May I pay some tribute to the Secretary of State, although it is perhaps for the Committee, not for me, to do so? She has expended a huge amount of time, energy and passion on this matter. She is very much on top of the issue, recognising that we have to make some fundamental changes in the way in which we look at programmes, particularly in Burma. We are much respected across the globe for the tremendous contribution that we have made since the Rohingya crisis came to pass some six months ago.

**Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD):** This is obviously hugely disappointing for the Select Committee. If true, it is shocking to hear the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) say that Aung San Suu Kyi may have been personally responsible for blocking the visas, although I know that it will not dampen the Committee’s efforts and determination to keep the pressure on. This is a clear signal that the diplomatic relationship is breaking down, which is frankly understandable and in some ways even reassuring, because a regime that commits ethnic cleansing is no ally of ours. The Minister is absolutely right that we must keep supporting and helping those vulnerable people in Myanmar, particularly the Rohingyas.

May I press the Minister on the issue of accountability for Min Aung Hlaing and those responsible in the military? Could he have discussions with others within the Security Council about the possibility of a resolution to refer those responsible for the atrocities to the International Criminal Court?

**Mark Field:** I thank the hon. Lady. The UK continues to work to maintain the UN Security Council’s focus on Rakhine. She will be aware that in recent weeks the Syrian issue has obviously been very important, and last autumn there was a lot of focus on what was happening on the Korean peninsula. That is not to say, however, that we are not persistent about trying to make this matter as high profile as possible. At our request, the UN Security Council held an open briefing on 13 February to focus on the very specific issue of returns and the likelihood of those returns happening.

Last November, the UK secured the very first UN Security Council statement on Burma—a presidential statement—in a decade, and we will ensure that the Council maintains its focus and attention on what is happening, and has happened, in Burma. We are preparing a response to the report by the fact-finding mission of the UN Human Rights Council, which is due in March, and we co-sponsored the Human Rights Council and General Assembly resolutions.

On the notion that we have a headlong rush towards a UN Security Council resolution, I have to say that the feeling on the ground in New York from our representatives is that that would almost certainly be vetoed by the Chinese and probably by the Russians as well. That is
not to say that we might not test that further at some point, but there are other avenues that we wish to pursue. One of the reasons I have been so pleased to be able to work together with our colleagues in the European Union is that getting sanctions from that quarter will achieve some progress, particularly against leading lights within the military.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am very pleased that the Minister is in his place, because his work on the question of Burma has been impressive over these many months. The work of the ambassador in-country, Andrew Patrick, has been extremely impressive. None of this is down to his failure at all; indeed, I am sure that he could not have done more.

This is a very distressing scene. I am, however, torn between the desire to ensure that we have oversight of the enormous amount of money that we are spending and, as my hon. Friend the Minister puts it, our promotion of the cause of democracy. I speak with an interest, because one of the Clerks who has been to Naypyidaw is the Second Clerk of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and the Clerk who is going there is also Clerk of the Foreign Affairs Committee. All I can say is that if people learned 1% of the knowledge that those two fabulous individuals could impart, it would be a huge blessing to the Burmese people and a great blessing to the relationship between the United Kingdom and Burma.

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend, as ever, for his insights. I will obviously pass that message on.

It is worth pointing out, if I may, a little about the bilateral action that continues to take place. Many Members will be aware that the Foreign Secretary was in Burma during the most recent recess and met Aung San Suu Kyi, stressing that refugees must feel safe returning home and need to be supervised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In fact, the Foreign Secretary has spoken to Aung San Suu Kyi no fewer than five times since the crisis began last August. I met her last September. I met the Defence Minister and deputy Foreign Minister, both from the military, when I was in Naypyidaw in November. That work will continue, to try to bring forward as many options for discussion as possible. As my hon. Friend rightly says, there is some fantastic expertise that we need to try to channel, and we must keep the pressure on as far as possible.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has described what has been happening to the Rohingya as a textbook case of ethnic cleansing. Is not the withholding of visas from myself and other members of the International Development Committee a textbook case of an authoritarian regime with something to hide trying to shield itself from legitimate international scrutiny? If Aung San Suu Kyi is indeed responsible for that, is nothing short of disgraceful. Does the Minister agree that all this points to the fact that the international community has to be far more assertive in pressing for unimpeded humanitarian access to Rakhine state?

Mark Field: I do agree. As I say, I do not want to cast judgment until we know the facts about the involvement of Aung San Suu Kyi or other senior members of the regime in the refusal, but it is absolutely right that this is a textbook case of the worst elements of an increasingly closed regime. I repeat to the hon. Gentleman, as I said at the outset, that in the midst of our displeasure, anger and frustration at not being able to visit there, we should please, please remember the interests of those millions in Burma who so desperately need our help and support.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your letter—your intervention in this case—which was very well received. I think it was Daw Suu herself who said, when she was here, that if she could see the cut and thrust of Prime Minister’s questions, she knew that she was moving towards democracy. Unfortunately, the country is moving in the wrong direction. Since I saw you chair the all-party parliamentary group on Burma in 2005, Mr Speaker, I have always wanted, if I got elected to this place, to help to move the country towards democracy. Now that I am co-chair of the APPG, that is what I intend to do. I am also, as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy, keen to play my role in looking at economic development in the country; and as an International Development Committee member, keen to look at health and education for the Kachin, the Karen, the Shan and all the other ethnic groups.

Does the Minister agree that now that the International Development Committee is going to be carrying on its work, it will only be speaking to people on the Bangladeshi side, the refugees themselves and the non-governmental organisations, giving a one-sided view that the Burmese Government could otherwise have helped with? Does he also agree that it will make the work far harder for those of us who want to take a holistic view of Burma as a country?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his work in all those areas, and indeed as the Conservative party’s vice-chairman in charge of London affairs. I do not know where he gets the time to do all this work. Joking aside, I agree with everything he says. In many ways, we need to have a proper perspective on this issue, not just from the Bangladeshi side but from Burma too, in order to see to what extent there is any efficacy in being able to return to Burma at the earliest opportunity.

May I ask all Members here please to keep faith with Burma and the Burmese people? However much we distrust, dislike and wish to dislodge any Government, we must remember that this is important work that is being done. If we do not do it here in the United Kingdom, it is not clear that anyone else is going to have the commitment that we have; part of that, as everyone knows, is for historical reasons. Please keep that faith.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I am, of course, disappointed by this, as one of the Committee members refused a visa. I am also deeply disappointed as a Member of Parliament who represents a city that not only gave Aung San Suu Kyi the freedom of our city but allowed her to curate the Brighton festival a number of years ago. This is a huge personal disappointment for me. Aung San Suu Kyi seems more and more now to be part of the problem, and not the solution, in some of the ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. This is happening not just to the Rohingya but also perhaps to Chinese nationals and
Christian minorities in Burma. Will the Government consider convening an emergency summit to put sanctions in place not only against Burma but possibly even against San Suu Kyi’s family assets here in the UK? Will we immediately review some of our other aid projects such as the £5 million that we gave to Yangon University in a project with Oxford University last month, to make sure that that money is not being used for academic work that undermines the Rohingya? Could we at least try to go to the Security Council to get a referral to the ICC? It is better to have tried and failed than to have not tried at all.

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the fact that, apart from the issue around the Rohingya—terrible though it is, and on a different scale from other minorities—other minorities have also suffered in that country, often for many decades. I take on board much of what he said. I have covered some of the issues about why we have not gone for a UN Security Council resolution at this stage. I hope that whatever investment is being made between the universities of Oxford and Yangon, some of it may be for very positive reasons, and we should not necessarily criticise it. However, we need to get to the bottom of that.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I was very depressed to learn the news last night that the visas had not come through. I do not know whether the Burmese authorities think we are going to now just give up, shrug our shoulders and walk away. We are not going to do that. They have to understand that we are a democratically elected Parliament, and we are a democratically elected Select Committee. We even elect our own Chair. Within our own Parliament, we do not have a quota for the military; everybody is elected in exactly the same manner.

It is important to stress that the money we give is there for the people and does not go to the military regime or through the military regime. The reason it is so much is because of the military regime.

I thank you, Mr Speaker, for everything you have done. You were one of the champions for freeing Aung San Suu Kyi, from house arrest, and you were able to get her to address both Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall, which is a unique privilege for someone who is not officially a Head of State. I ask you and the Minister of State to carry on with your work, because the Rohingya problem is not going to go away. We are going to Bangladesh to see part of the problem, but we want to go to Burma, and we want to see exactly how our money is being spent. I implore both of you to carry on and see if that can be done this year.

Mark Field: It is a great pleasure to speak on behalf of the Speaker on this matter. Some of us have worries about getting a word in edgeways at times, it has to be said, but I thank you, Mr Speaker. This is not a time for great levity, and I understand that these are very serious issues.

I thank my hon. Friend, and he is absolutely right. We will do our best to ensure that what is happening to the Rohingya and to other minorities—for those of us who have the interests of Burma and Burmese people in their heart—continues to have a high profile in the months and years to come.
and two nurses from Kettering General Hospital recently returned from the Rohingya camps, where they were successfully combating the spread of disease. May I draw the Minister’s attention to the problem on the Bangladeshi side of the border? Bangladesh has been incredibly generous in hosting the Rohingya refugees and going out of its way to assist them, but the Bangladeshi refugees are overwhelmed with visa applications from international aid workers and the like, and they are having difficulty processing those visas in a timely way, which is holding up some of the delivery of aid. Is there anything we can do to assist the Bangladeshi in overcoming that problem?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is something we have identified. We are working with DFID to try to speed it up, and our embassy in Dhaka has made and will continue to make representations, to ensure that as far as possible, NGOs and others, particularly in relation to medical help, are properly and quickly able to get people on the ground in Bangladesh.

Points of Order

2.26 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We all heard at Prime Minister’s questions the Prime Minister quite rightly speak of the importance of early diagnosis when it comes to cancer, and yet in today’s newspapers, we have learned that some clinical commissioning groups are offering cash incentives to GPs not to refer patients to hospitals, including cancer patients. We believe that that is totally unacceptable. Has the Secretary of State for Health given you any notice that he intends to come to the House to make a statement to tell us how extensive that scheme is, so that we can call upon him to rule out that unacceptable practice?

Mr Speaker: No, but it is open to the shadow Leader of the House to raise that matter at business questions tomorrow. Knowing the perspicacity of the hon. Gentleman, I feel sure that, having registered his concerns today, he will articulate them in subsequent days until he elicits a ministerial response.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that you have always concerned yourself with the issue of political prisoners. I have discovered that there is one in our own country at the moment. The Foreign Secretary declared this morning on television that he was desperate to be able to publish the letter to the Prime Minister that was referred to in the discussions earlier, but apparently now the Prime Minister will not let him. The poor chap is languishing, unable to fulfil his stated intention and desires. Obviously he wants to keep the House informed of what is going on and what his view is. I do not know whether he has written two letters and only one of them has thus far got into the public domain, but I wonder whether there is any means of freeing the Foreign Secretary, so that he is no longer a political prisoner in that way.

Mr Speaker: I note what the hon. Gentleman says and his reference to correspondence and to the activities of the Foreign Secretary, but not entirely for the first time, and therefore not uncharacteristically, I rather fear that the hon. Gentleman might have invested me with powers that I do not possess. I do not have power over, responsibility for or the capacity to free the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

Chris Bryant: The Foreign Office One.

Mr Speaker: The Foreign Office One, as the hon. Gentleman dubs him from a sedentary position. We will have to leave that there. Some people may think that it is a good thing that I am not responsible for the Foreign Secretary, and other people may think it is a bad thing—I say, retaining the impartiality of the Chair—but it is a fact that I am not responsible for the right hon. Gentleman, other than with regard to his responsibilities to appear in the House.

Chris Bryant: Shame!

Mr Speaker: We must leave the matter there for now.
Social Media Service Providers (Civil Liability and Oversight)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.29 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I beg to move.

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make social media service providers liable for online publications in respect of civil proceedings in specified circumstances; to establish and confer functions upon a commissioner for online safety; to make provision about the disclosure of certain information by social media service providers; and for connected purposes.

I suggest to the House that this Bill is an important legislative proposal. In the three weeks subsequent to my tabling it, two incidents have occurred that have directly impacted me, my staff and my family. Those incidents are specific examples of why our powers in this country over internet companies are too weak, and this Bill would transform the situation. In the first example, a series of violent threats were directed at me and my family on Twitter, and they were acted on by the police in the appropriate way. Immediately on receiving the tweets, I registered them, in the Twitter style, with Twitter. Doing so removes them from the public domain. The police need to know the precise times at which those tweets were sent—not the times at which they went on to the parliamentary system via email, which I can give them—but Twitter refuses to provide them to me.

The second example concerns Facebook. A gentleman was convicted and imprisoned—I believe he is still in prison—following a series of very aggressive internet attacks on other Members of Parliament and me. I was referred to directly in the court proceedings. Last week, there was a repeat of these Facebook attacks. A fake account was created in my name, with my face on it, to put out statements that could best be described as incendiary. They are the sort of thing that none of us in here, myself included, would ever dream of saying, and they are designed to incite violence against me. The first time that happened, it had just such an impact: extremists in my locality made direct and specific threats. Facebook refuses to assist by providing the message, which was immediately deleted, so that I can give it to the police. The individual who originated it has served, and may still be serving, a custodial sentence for precisely such activity, with that exemplar part of the case taken against him.

I come to the purpose of the Bill. If the broadcast media—television or radio—or the newspapers failed to co-operate, I would be free to take civil action against them, as would the Government and the police. To take action in the courts might be complicated, but the fact that it is possible means that newspapers and broadcast media are co-operative with individuals and the police. When it comes to internet companies, we have no such powers. Our law comes from section 230 of the United States Communications Decency Act 1996, which explicitly confers immunity on the operators of internet services, who are not deemed to be publishers of, and therefore not legally liable for, the words of third parties who use their services.

European directive 2000/31 of the European Parliament and the Council on 8 June 2000 was harmonised into UK law by the Electronic Commerce (EC Directive) Regulations 2002, which also explicitly give immunity to internet companies. Such immunity is not given, in a free and competitive market, to newspapers, television or radio. In other words, there is a specific immunity solely and exclusively for internet companies.

I am not seeking, and I am sure that Parliament would not seek, to interfere with the rights of free speech or a free internet. But with a democratic internet, just as with a democratic media and free press, we need the ability to act if criminal acts are being carried out that impact on us. The two examples that I have given have had an impact on me, my staff and my family, and one of the perpetrators has been through a criminal prosecution and been imprisoned. If we could use the same process with internet companies as we can with other media, internet companies would co-operate immediately.

It is absurd that the police in this country cannot force Twitter, Facebook, Google or any of the others to provide evidence that is required for criminal prosecutions. It is done on the basis of good will. Successive Governments have attempted to establish good codes of conduct. The internet companies have their conditions of service, in which they say what they will do. I would consider taking action in precisely the cases in which those terms and conditions have been broken but the internet company has failed to act appropriately. It cannot be right that with Twitter, for example, our police can wait many weeks for evidence that they require to prove criminality—it could be to do with terrorism or other violent threats—and there is no guarantee that they will get it.

The simple removal of the internet companies from this exemption would create an equal playing field in the media market for television companies, radio and the free newspapers. It would get rid of some of the absurdities. At the moment, it is possible to have an impact on something that is published in the media, but the same thing can run simultaneously on the internet and we do not have those powers. There are countless examples.

A very good debate was initiated in the House of Lords by Baroness Kidron. I have not got the time to go into it, but I recommend it to the House. She went through precisely how social media companies commission, edit and curate content for broadcasting and publishing. One example of how that affects our societal values is the spreading of fake news. We have seen that with the outbreak of measles, which may have been caused by fake news about inoculations. If an internet company fails to act, there is nothing that Government can do about that, even if public health in this country could be under threat. Should the Government choose to do something about it? That is a different question, which involves a different set of decisions. But the Government cannot do so, because they do not have the power. We are seeing mounting pressure. Germany has adopted a fairly modest system with the potential to fine companies for a failure to remove content within 24 hours. Australia has brought in an e-safety commissioner. This Bill suggests a similar thing could happen in this country.

At its core, we need to treat the internet companies in exactly the same way as other media. A free media can be taken to court if it fails to co-operate on criminality. What is good enough for TV, radio and newspapers is good enough for social media and the internet. I recommend the proposed Bill to the House.
Question put and agreed to.
Ordered,
That John Mann, Ruth Smeeth, Luciana Berger, Dr Matthew Offord, Nicky Morgan, Andrew Percy, Anna Turley, Lilian Greenwood, Liz Saville Roberts, Dr Lisa Cameron and Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi present the Bill.
John Mann accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April, and to be printed (Bill 170).

Business without Debate

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) BILL
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Question agreed to.
Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time.
Question agreed to.
Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,
That, at this day’s sitting—
(1) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this order; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and
(2) notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business), the Private Business set down by the Chairman of Ways and Means shall be entered upon at the conclusion of proceedings on the motion relating to Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy (whether before, at or after four o’clock) and may then be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours, after which the Speaker shall interrupt the business; and the business may be entered upon after the moment of interruption.—(Andrea Leadsom.)
underpin the new policy. It will make clear the expectations for the behaviour of everyone in the parliamentary community, and will be consulted on on that basis. Second, the new complaints and grievance procedure will be independent of political parties.

Thirdly, it was acknowledged that sexual harassment and sexual violence are different from other forms of inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying and intimidation. Therefore, separate procedures will be agreed for those looking to raise a complaint regarding sexual harassment and those with a complaint of bullying. This is an important distinction, and while everyone has acknowledged the significance of complaints of sexual harassment, evidence from staff made it clear that instances of intimidation and bullying are in fact more prevalent. Fourthly, therefore, MPs’ staff require proper human resources advice—something that has previously been lacking, and that will go a long way to helping prevent and resolve workplace grievances.

Importantly, the new system will be based on the principles of equality. It will be confidential and fair to all parties. It will be in line with the laws of natural justice, and it will command the confidence of all those who use it. The working group took advice at an early stage that, rather than reinventing the wheel, we should work with, and build on, the many sound processes and systems already in place.

Today, we are bringing forward a motion that will enable the House Commission to authorise House officials to take forward the group’s recommendations and implement our proposals in full. This is a big step towards creating a more professional environment and a Parliament that is among the best in the world in treating people with dignity and respect at work.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I commend the Leader of the House for all her work on this important report. She will agree that Parliament should be a beacon of best practice, rather than running to play catch-up. Will she confirm that that means we need to make sure that these procedures relate to everybody on this estate? That includes, crucially, making sure that they extend to our constituency offices—to visitors to constituency offices—as soon as possible. I know we debated that in the group, but will she reassure us that this is a real priority for her going forward?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who was an assiduous contributor to all the work of the working group, and I thank her sincerely for her dedication to it. Of course, we recall the happy hours spent debating that very point, and we concluded in the end that it is a priority to ensure that the behaviour code—the protection—extends to all those who come into contact with Members of Parliament. But we concluded that, in the immediate future, we should focus on bedding in a new complaints procedure that will deal with the Palace of Westminster and our work as part of our parliamentary duties, and that once that is bedded down, we should have a review six months into its operation of how we should deal with others who come into contact with MPs, where there is that tricky grey area of where someone’s public life is and where someone’s private life is. I hope the hon. Lady is reassured by my once again making a commitment that we must look at that. She is exactly right.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I really appreciate the right hon. Lady giving way. On the definitions of bullying, why is the older version of the definition used, as opposed to the most recent version, which takes away the issue around intentionality? Often, perpetrators hide behind that.

Andrea Leadsom: The work on the detailed procedures, including definitions, will be finalised once the work of the House authorities gets under way to put these proposals in place. If the hon. Lady wants to propose a different definition, I will be very pleased to look at it, and I will certainly take into account all views in that regard. I am committed to ensuring that work proceeds at pace over the next few months, and I am pleased to report that the House authorities have already begun preliminary work on several of the workstreams needed to implement these policies.

Members will also want to know that the following four interim steps have already been taken to improve the services available. I have mentioned them previously, because we wanted to ensure that we had immediate steps following the serious allegations we all heard about in November. First, enhanced support arrangements have already been provided through the extension of the employee assistance programme helpline run by Health Assured. Secondly, face-to-face counselling sessions can be offered where appropriate. Thirdly, an interim service providing HR advice for Members’ staff was launched in January. Fourthly, political parties have all updated their behaviour codes and published them on the parliamentary intranet. This demonstrates that we have already taken urgent action, but of course the new procedures will go much further.

For the benefit of Members not present at my previous statement, I will turn briefly to the process for making a complaint or raising a grievance against a Member of this House. As colleagues will appreciate, the process for raising complaints against other members of the parliamentary community, such as peers, Members’ and peers’ staff, journalists and contractors will each differ according to their particular role. All procedures are designed for the protection of staff and parliamentarians alike and have fairness at their heart. It is intended that the House authorities will procure two independent services: one to consider allegations of sexual harassment and violence, and the other to consider workplace bullying and intimidation. Both avenues will provide support and, where needed, will investigate the complaint. Where informal resolution is not possible and the complaint is upheld, it will be referred to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards in the case of a Member of this House.

The working group proposes that the commissioner’s role will be expanded and reformed. She will have access to legal advice, and will be able to impose a new range of lower-level sanctions that may include a written apology, mandatory training or future behaviour agreements. The commissioner will be able to review any finding by the independent investigator, and where she does so she will ensure that her investigations are also strictly confidential, that both the complainant and the alleged perpetrator have access to all evidence, and, crucially, that each has the right to representation or to represent themselves. These measures will ensure fairness.
In the most serious cases, the commissioner will refer her findings to the Committee on Standards. The Committee can recommend to the House that an individual is suspended, and the House will vote on the recommendation. It is through this route that the existing procedures under the Recall of MPs Act 2015 could be invoked. The trigger for recall remains the same as it is now, and there is no plan for changes to primary legislation. The working group recognised the fact that those who work in this place are often in the media spotlight, and that vexatious and malicious complaints are a risk. The new procedures will therefore ensure checks and balances are in place to guard against such complaints, while making sure complainants can come forward in a safe and confidential manner.

I will turn now in more detail to the individual workstreams needed to implement the new procedures. We expect six major workstreams to be established, and I would like to address these individually. It is the intention that most of the workstreams will be completed in three months or less.

First, and very importantly, a new behaviour code for Parliament will be developed. This was a key recommendation of the working group report. It will ensure that we are all aware of and able to promote the highest standards that are expected in the parliamentary community. It will cover all those working in both Westminster and constituency offices, and all pass holders. With the approval of the House, we will consult on this new behaviour code: it is important that those who would be subject to the code have the opportunity to contribute to its development. The code must be something that binds us all. It will underpin the new scheme, which will be able to receive, investigate and resolve allegations of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment. It will also be the cornerstone of a cultural change to uphold dignity at work for all those who work with or for Parliament. It is our intention that the behaviour code will be brought forward within three months.

Secondly, there will be an implementation workstream around the bullying and harassment procedure. This will develop detailed policies and procedures, and commission the services of a new reporting helpline and a workplace dispute resolution service. The new helpline will signpost to available services, and ultimately the new services will be able to investigate independently allegations of bullying and harassment. It will also be the cornerstone of a cultural change to uphold dignity at work for all those who work with or for Parliament. It is our intention that the behaviour code will be brought forward within three months.

Thirdly, there will be a separate workstream commissioning a new independent specialist service around sexual harassment and violence. A single point of ongoing support will be provided for complainants by an independent sexual violence adviser. Investigations of misconduct will be able to be conducted by an independent investigator with a specialist qualification in understanding sexual harassment.

Rachael Maskell: I thank the Leader of the House for being generous with her time. May I just caution her once again about the issue of mediation when it comes to bullying and sexual harassment, because of the inequalities of power? We want to ensure that there are clear processes that enable equality of power. Often, mediation has the reverse effect.

Andrea Leadsom: I hope I can reassure the hon. Lady that the issue she raises was at the core of all the evidence we took and all the discussions we had, and of the determination of the working group to address the issue of imbalance of power to make sure that the interest of the complainant is at the heart of the whole procedure, so it is very much complainant-led and ensures that people feel safe and are able to come forward in a safe space without the fear of being intimidated further. I think I can reassure the hon. Lady on that point, but of course I am very happy to speak to her separately if she wants further reassurance.

Fourthly, new training is already available to help people understand more clearly what types of behaviour might be considered bullying or harassment and the impact that this can have on individuals. This is the first step towards implementing the working group’s recommendation that the new independent grievance and complaints policy needs to be supported by a comprehensive training programme. Training will be a significant workstream and will also include learning opportunities for Members and their offices in their role as employers. The House authorities have also established a new induction programme for Members’ staff, with the first session being run this week in response to the working group’s request.

Other individual areas of work, including on the fifth workstream, are already under way. This includes work to prepare for a third party supplier of HR advice for Members’ staff to replace the interim service launched in January. This will be supported by a new Members’ staff book. A first draft has already been compiled by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and the House authorities.

Finally, the working group has been clear that in order to implement a number of the group’s proposals, the sixth workstream will develop the remit and processes of the Parliamentary Commissioners and the Standards Committees in both Houses. This workstream will necessarily involve separate but parallel processes in both Houses, liaising with each other as necessary. At the end of these processes, changes will also be likely to be needed to the existing parliamentary codes, not least to reflect the new behaviour code.

Regarding the amendment on the Order Paper, I welcome its clarity. I assure right hon. and hon. Members that as well as having recently met the new Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and having recently scheduled a meeting with the Standards Committee, I can absolutely give the assurance that consultation with the commissioners and the Standards Committees will continue and will form a key part of the next stage of our work.

It is important that the development of these workstreams is underpinned by fairness, confidentiality and a recognition of the unique environment in which these procedures are being implemented. The new arrangements must therefore be monitored, reviewed and embedded as part of a wider change in culture. I would like to pay particular tribute in this regard to the Political and Constitutional Affairs Committee for its excellent recommendations to the working group. Unfortunately, the Committee’s letter was omitted from the list of
written submissions in annex B of the report—for that I apologise. One of the suggestions made in its submission was about the importance of review and scrutiny of the working group’s proposals. It is our intention that once the proposals have been implemented, a cross-House body or group should review the implementation and operation of the new processes, and in the meantime a steering group, whose membership will be based on the composition of the working group, will oversee the implementation period.

In conclusion, I am confident that the measures that the working group has recommended will provide the basis for the significant and sustainable change to which we all aspire: a Parliament that provides dignity at work for all. We need to make sure that our Parliament is among the best in the world, demonstrating our commitment to equality, justice and fairness. I hope that the House will endorse the working group’s recommendations today.

3 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for opening the debate. This is the fourth time that the matter has been before the House and it is good that we can continue to debate this important topic in this way. We have had three statements and now this motion. If we cast our minds back, our first meeting was on Monday 6 November 2017, with the Prime Minister and the leaders and representatives of other parties. The report was published on 8 February 2018, and I have passed it on to every Member of the Opposition. I place on record my thanks to all the staff involved for putting together the report and all colleagues who were involved in the working group.

All the motion does is set out the work that the House authorities have to undertake. There needs to be time to look at how to put the processes and procedures in place, and, of course, a working group cannot do that. To pick up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who worked in this sector, she will have an opportunity to feed in to the full-time, permanent person who will be dealing with this.

The Leader of the House outlined in detail exactly the work that needs to be done, so I will confine myself briefly to two areas: training and the steering group. On training, I do not consider any training programme to be onerous. It is not a judgment on people’s views, but just ensures that everyone is in the same place. It will be useful for all Members to be updated with the latest practices and acceptable behaviour in a modern workplace.

Rachael Maskell: Can we not ensure that training is mandatory and face-to-face, and that it is brought in this year, so that we do not have to wait until the next Parliament?

Valerie Vaz: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. That is exactly what I would want to see from any training programme. As the Leader of the House outlined, we expect something to be put in place after three months, when the permanent person has looked at all the details of what they have to do.

Secondly, the steering group will monitor the work that has been done. As the Leader of the House knows, the working group was set up on an ad hoc basis. A few people have been asked to and were allowed to join the group, but in my view, the steering group should be a bit more representative and perhaps include other groups and unions. I would support the inclusion of the House trade union side to widen the representation slightly, but perhaps the numbers on the steering group need to be reduced.

Most importantly, a number of new initiatives were set up. When events first hit us in November, Mr Speaker acted very swiftly and extended the helpline so that it was a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week helpline from Health Assured. It would be useful to have the figures on how that is being used, perhaps at the next Commission meeting, because it will then have been six months since it was extended to every single person working on the Estate.

I do not underestimate the amount of work that the House authorities need to do. Although it is useful to get updates from time to time, they need to be left to get on with the work, consulting my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) and his Committee, the Select Committee on Standards; the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) and his Committee, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee; and all other hon. Members who feel that they have something to offer. Only when processes are in place and being used will we know if they are robust and command the support of those who seek to use them.

The Opposition support the motion as tabled and amended and look forward to being updated. We thank the staff for taking on this task, so that we have a truly modern Parliament, where everyone knows the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in a safe and secure workplace.

3.5 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): It is just a few months since Parliament faced a wave of allegations of bullying and sexual harassment, in an atmosphere in which it was at times hard to distinguish real and serious cases from the proliferation of accusations and rumours. It exposed the lack of a credible, transparent and robust system for addressing legitimate complaints and grievances about bullying and sexual harassment. It led to the establishment of the working group and its report, which I fully support. The report is carefully drafted and reflects a great deal of thought and discussion.

The working group has proposed first, the adoption of a new shared behaviour code for all who work in Parliament and its Members; and secondly, the introduction of a new independent complaints and grievance policy to underpin the behaviour code. This, not surprisingly, concentrates on creating new rules and new procedures for investigating incidents and complaints, not least to try to address the present hotch-potch of arrangements for different categories of people and the glaring gaps in the system, such as the oversight of how we MPs employ and care for our staff.

The working group has rightly spent a lot of its time discussing and defining what constitutes the bad behaviour that must be called out. But there is also a need to address how Parliament arrived at this situation—how a culture of tolerance towards bullying and sexual harassment has become embedded and was left substantially unchallenged until now. Very few people who come into
political life and to work in Parliament—at whatever level and whatever capacity in this building—are bad people, and most are appalled by the culture that has been exposed.

So how have we let this happen? After all, MPs are already subject to the House of Commons code of conduct. As employers, we are already covered by employment law, and there is the Respect policy to protect staff of the House. It is clear, however, that there needs to be a wider and continuing discussion about the positive attitudes and kinds of behaviour that we want to promote in Parliament and in public life, and what the values and principles are upon which those positive attitudes and behaviours should be based.

The remit of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which I chair, includes oversight of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the ministerial code, the civil service code and the special advisers’ code. More broadly, much of PACAC’s work is concerned with leadership and governance in the civil service and public bodies, so we have done a lot of work on this area.

In December, PACAC submitted evidence to the working group, drawing on the work that PACAC has carried out in other areas. This was in the form of a letter to the Leader of the House, which she kindly acknowledged, although it was not included among the record of written submissions received by the group. I know that it was substantially discussed, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), the spokesman for the Opposition, for drawing attention to it, too.

Some of the reasons for our failures are practical and procedural, and the working group has made great strides to address these. However, it is also clear that there is confusion among MPs and others about what behaviour should be subject to public scrutiny and what should be regarded as entirely private. As we argued in our submission to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards’ review of the House of Commons code of conduct last year, this confusion is not resolved by our current Commons code—far from it. PACAC set out the fundamental ambiguity about whether our Commons code of conduct was intended to function as a set of principles governing the whole of Members’ behaviour, which would naturally extend, to a degree, into the private sphere of MPs’ conduct, or simply as a set of regulations, mostly about financial disclosures, relating only to an MP’s public role. The 2015 code states that it does not seek to regulate what Members do in their private and personal lives, yet it is clear from the recent controversies that it is not always possible to keep the two as separate as many of us would like.

The risk now is that the new behaviour code will again be mainly concerned with rules and regulations and new enforcement procedures, but if that is just patched on to the present system, which has manifestly failed on at least one of its main objectives—to promote public confidence in the standards we observe in Parliament—we should not be surprised if problems continue to arise. The working group is right to promote a system of training to support the new code—there might be problems with persuading some colleagues that they should be subject to the training, as I will come to; it is easy to put such a thing in a document, but there might be practicalities when it comes to persuading colleagues to participate—but what about extending that to training about what the seven principles of public life actually mean in the lives of all public figures in this place?

Caroline Lucas: I cannot wait to find out whether the hon. Gentleman agrees that in order to persuade colleagues to undertake training some kind of sanctions might concentrate people’s minds—for example, having pay docked, or something similar.

Mr Jenkin: I am so much more in favour of persuasion than coercion. You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. We could force MPs to attend a training session, but what kind of attitude would they have towards that training if they did not want to do it? Let us take a step back and think about how we want to do this. I agree with the hon. Lady, however, that unless we promote conversation and understanding about the principles and values that should guide behaviour, the risk is that confusion about what is acceptable will persist.

Rules and regulations are, of course, important, but PACAC’s work has shown so often that when rules are not underpinned by clear principles and values that are understood, discussed and talked about, the outcome is a preoccupation with compliance with the rules rather than with upholding what reflects the values and principles we want upheld. The road to damnation is all too congested these days with people arguing how their conduct was “within the rules”.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s comments. He is talking about what we can do to improve the culture in this place, and I wholeheartedly endorse his suggestion of training on the seven principles of public life, although I actually think that we probably do need some sanctions and mandatory training. Does he think we need a different way of looking at this? It would be arrogant of someone to take the view that they did not need training, as if we stop learning at 18, when we leave full-time education, rather than continually aiming to find out more and work out how to do our job and fulfil our responsibilities better—and that includes continual learning and, yes, continual training.

Mr Jenkin: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady, and I so much want her to win this argument and win hearts and minds, rather than have to resort to coercion, which would be so counter-productive.

To avoid just being preoccupied with compliance in the future, both the regulations and the principles and values that we want behaviour to reflect must be clearly set out and adjudicated. Perhaps only a breach of the rules should attract sanction, but nevertheless there needs to be some authority—we suggest, in respect of MPs, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards—who would at least call out people who are failing to live up to the principles and values we have all signed up to. We also argued in our submission that the rules should be adjudicated by a separate person with appropriate legal expertise—the appointment of legal advice to the commissioner is a really good step in that direction,
because the role of the commissioner as a thought leader is perhaps more important than her role as an adjudicator of rules.

The working group recognises the need for comprehensive training for MPs, peers and staff to help them to understand and prevent harassment and sexual abuse and to assist professional practice and Members in their position as employers. It is essential, however, that the work to embed the values outlined in the behaviour code throughout the parliamentary community be led by leaders, including MPs and peers themselves, and not delegated to support staff, who will not have the authority to carry out the kind of training that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) referred to earlier. The culture of an organisation is the responsibility of its leaders. We parliamentarians must be the champions of change, or it will not happen, and we must be held accountable for its success. We cannot delegate this vital governance function to anyone else, and nor will Parliament secure public trust if we seem incapable of exercising effective governance.

Caroline Lucas: What concerns, if any, does the hon. Gentleman have about the role of the Standards Committee in identifying what is a relevant sanction? Does he share my concern that the Committee, being partly made up of MPs, might be open to the accusation of MPs marking their own homework, if essentially it will be MPs making the final decision on whether a colleague is expelled for long enough to lead down the road to recall?

Mr Jenkin: All these ideas for what sanctions should be available are good ideas, but the accusation of marking our own homework is an unavoidable consequence of the constitutional position of this House and the other place. The advice on the basis of which we mark our own homework must, however, be much more explicit, which is why the provision of legal advice to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards is important. In the end, adjudication on far clearer legal principles by someone with juridical experience of judging evidence and rules, such as a retired judge, is preferable to this rather vague arrangement at the moment. That is not to criticise any past or present commissioner; it is just that we ask that person to take on an enormous responsibility—adjudicating rules and evidence—for which they might not have had much training or experience. It is only "one" of the qualifications of the job, as opposed to "the" qualification in respect of a legal adviser or separate adjudicator. I hope that that answers the hon. Lady's question.

On the introduction of an independent complaints and grievance policy to underpin the behaviour code, I am delighted that the working group has recognised the need to change procedures to ensure that all levels of inappropriate behaviour can be addressed proportionately and effectively. It has also recognised the need to ensure that appropriate support be available for both complainants and alleged perpetrators and, crucially, the need for a human resources service for MPs' and peers' staff. I would like to endorse these conclusions, the latter of which was also included in the PACAC submission to the working group.

Like the expenses failure in 2009, the recent scandal is largely about a failure of our own governance, and this stems, to a significant degree, from a failure by Parliament to establish means by which we can be more mindful of ourselves as an institution. As always, in reaction there is a cry for tougher, more comprehensive rules and tougher sanctions against those who break them, and this is undoubtedly important. Good governance is also, however, about much more than this, and we now have an opportunity to have a much more positive conversation about the values we want to promote and which we expect public leaders to live by. I hope that the proposed behaviour code will clearly set out those principles and values, and that the review and scrutiny of the new system's success will assess how successfully they are being embedded in our attitude and our behaviour.

This reform also needs to be properly integrated into a reformed House of Commons code of conduct. I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has said that there will be changes in the code as a consequence. She emphasised that the working group had agreed that there should be a review of these recommendations once they are implemented, and I am grateful for that. PACAC recommends that the review should be overseen by a Joint Committee of both Houses, which should also include representatives of unions and employees' organisations such as the working group. Its work should also cover the codes of conduct of both Houses. I fear that if such a review is not conducted and we fail to integrate the new arrangements fully with the existing arrangements in both Houses, we will not have established the stable and robust system for the future that we all wish to see.

3.21 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin). I always seem to follow him during debates such as this, and that is probably as it should be, given his thoughtful contributions. I shall pick up a couple of the issues that he highlighted in what was, again, a very thoughtful speech.

I thank the Leader of the House for her opening contribution, and congratulate her on the stout leadership that she offered throughout the deliberations of the working group. She mentioned 100 hours; looking at my colleagues behind me, I have to say that they may not have been the most peaceful 100 hours—there was a little bit of fractious debate on some of the issues—but this is nevertheless a solid, cross-party piece of work. I do not think that, during my 17 years in the House, I have been involved in a piece of work that has been so considered, so reviewed and so comprehensively examined. That is a tribute to the diligence of all the members of the working group, many of whom are in the Chamber today. It was a privilege to be part of that group, and I hope that I played some small part in designing its hugely important report.

I join the Leader of the House in thanking the many witnesses who appeared before the group, and the staff who played such a vital role in helping to provide the testimony and evidence. I particularly thank the members of the secretariat, some of whom are in the Box this afternoon, for making sense of all the fractious debate and the various goings-on and producing what I think is a very readable report which addresses all the issues that were raised.

This was also a new way of working. I think that the most innovative and useful feature was the presence of staff members in the working group. Indeed, it was
probably a first. Staff had equality of membership with MPs, which, in my view, gives the report added legitimacy, and will go a long way towards ensuring that the staff can have confidence in it. I hope that we can do more of that type of work in the future, involving the staff of the House. When it comes to such critical work, particularly work on House issues, we need to hear their voices. As we discovered when preparing the report, they have solid contributions to make to discussions about the way in which the House functions.

This report is a significant and ambitious piece of work which will, hopefully, help to redefine the culture in our Westminster workplace. I think that the most important part is the first sentence of the first paragraph, which states:

“All those who work for or with Parliament have a right to dignity at work”.

Some may feel that that does not need to be said, but it underpins everything else in the report, and I believe that it cannot be reiterated often enough.

Some 15,000 people work in and around the parliamentary estate, including us weird and demanding Members of Parliament, the even stranger Members of the House of Lords, and the staff who support us so that we can make our grandstanding speeches and try to impress our constituents. The estate is full of very diverse and, I think we must concede, some weird and strange people. One thing, however, should unite everyone on the estate, and that is the conviction that all who work here have a right to expect to work in an environment that is free from bullying and harassment, especially sexual harassment. There should be zero tolerance of any inappropriate behaviour.

The report was not created in a vacuum; it was a response to some very serious allegations that emerged at the end of last year. The leaders of all our parties got together and decided that those allegations had to be addressed, and that something had to be done in Parliament about such a crucial issue. That was what sanctioned the work that we did. However, it was also a response to the wider societal debate about the many revelations that have followed the Weinstein revelations in Hollywood.

We are, I believe, at a critical juncture in the debate about harassment in the workplace. We have an historic opportunity to redefine what is and what is not acceptable, and to make an important contribution and commitment to dignity at work. It is essential for Parliament to lead the way, because Parliament is the forum of our national debate and the centre of our democracy. We would be shirking our responsibility if we did not issue the strongest possible statement that such behaviour is unacceptable in this place, as it should be unacceptable in any workplace in the United Kingdom. If we did not lead the way and establish procedures and processes to deal with our own issues, we would be letting down the people whom we serve throughout the country. We should set the example, and I believe that this document does that. It sets out, very clearly, our commitment to putting our own house in order.

The working group gained a sense of the scale of the problem in our own workplace after commissioning a short survey, asking people working in Parliament about their experiences of bullying and harassment. There was a solid response from staff throughout the estate, some 1,377 of whom replied. The results of that survey, together with the results of surveys conducted by Unite and the Members and Peers Staff Association, gave us a pretty strong impression of some of the unsavoury activities that had been taking place. Indeed, some of the findings were quite shocking. What those surveys revealed was that bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment, had been a feature of the lives of many people who work in Parliament. Of the respondents, 39% reported experiences of non-sexual harassment or bullying in the last year, and 19% reported experiences of sexual harassment or witnessing sexually inappropriate behaviour.

I have only just received—along with, I am sure, every other Member—an email from the Young Women’s Trust. It is an important e-mail, but, unfortunately, I saw it too late to be able to include it in the formal part of my speech. Figures that it included made it clear that the issues in young women’s workplaces throughout the country are not very different from the issues that we identified in the House of Commons.

The proposal is for a new shared code of behaviour that will underpin the new complaints and grievance policy. We will have a new, transparent, robust and credible complaints and grievance system that protects the confidentiality of proceedings and applies natural justice at its core, and it will be independent of the political parties, which is a key feature. Concerns have been raised about the political parties’ abilities to deal with these issues. I do not point the finger at any particular party; all our parties are bad at doing this stuff. We have several unresolved cases of people who have been charged with all sorts of activities but where that has still not been heard properly. There is a lack of confidence about political parties’ abilities to take these issues up, because of fear that the parties will try to defend and protect their own political interests. An independent route is therefore essential. A party route will still be available for people who feel that is more appropriate for them, but I hope that, in time, the independent route will be routinely used.

Another attractive and helpful feature is the proposal that all our staff secure HR support. I have been in this place quite a long time and I was shocked that that facility was not available for members of staff. Given that we are going to go forward with new codes of behaviour and new procedures for resolving grievance, it is essential that that support is given to staff. That is an important innovation that I am certain will be warmly received by members of staff throughout the House.

Concerns about sexual harassment are what led to this group being set up, and, importantly, in our report we recognise that sexual harassment is qualitatively different from other forms of inappropriate behaviour and therefore requires different definitions, procedures and approaches. This new confidential scheme will provide practical and emotional support to any complainant, and respect absolutely that complainants have confidentiality and have no obligation to report criminal offences to the police, although they will be supported if they feel that is appropriate and it is their choice to do so. All reports will be handled by a specialist-trained independent sexual violence adviser, who will be a single point of contact throughout the proceedings. The way this has been designed will give confidence to
anybody who wants to come forward that they will have respect and confidentiality, and that there will be a proper road map for how the complaint will be conducted and progressed.

Sanctions are important, too—we have already heard a few issues about that. I was disappointed when a draft report was leaked to the press over Christmas and the press sought to portray it as if Members would only have to make an apology, or would just get a slap on the wrist if they were found to be transgressors or guilty in any respect, but it was never anything of the sort. We have put forward a whole range of sanctions that will be in place, from just an apology where that might be all that is necessary to resolve a dispute, all the way up to the possibility of recall of an MP and the expulsion of a Member of the House of Lords. The full list of sanctions is included in the report.

Lastly, I want to talk about the culture of the House, as this issue came up time and again in our deliberations. I hate the culture of this House. I have never been fond of being in the House of Commons; some of my friends think it is a fantastic place to work and do their business, but I always find it a little bit uncomfortable. Perhaps it is the Scottish nationalist in me that grates a little bit, but this House has a peculiar historical culture that practically oozes patriarchy and abuse of power. I had a female friend in the House a few months ago who is very conscious of these issues and she told me that the portraits in this place seem to harass us because of the way the images are set up. The historical patriarchy we have in this place is embedded in the defining features of this House. Our workplace is a weird bastion of privilege. We call friends like mine who visited the House “Strangers” and legislation is designed on a sea of booze in the many bars we have around the perimeter of this Chamber.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes a good point about the sea of alcohol in this place. I was at an event that started at 1 o’clock this afternoon and wine was being served. Does he consider that appropriate within this building?

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that, because I want to come on to some compelling evidence that we secured during our inquiry. It came from Sarah Childs, who authored the “Good Parliament” report, which I know my hon. Friend will be familiar with. It is a fantastic report that got to the heart of how this place does business and the culture and environment we work in, and makes some practical suggestions for addressing it. We work here till after midnight some nights, and I do not mind doing that. It is what we do as parliamentarians, but no one should suggest that it is good practice or that it allows us to get home to our families or to have a proper work-life balance. That would be nonsense. We do the work because we are committed to doing it, but no one can convince me that this is good practice. That brings me back to the question of setting an example. We should be leading the way in good, normal working practice. We do it in Scotland, where we have designed our Parliament around a normal working day, and if it can be done there, we can do it here too. I hope that we will continue to engage in the work that Sarah Childs has undertaken. I cannot commend her report highly enough when it comes to having a look at the culture and environment of this place.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is making some powerful points. We are all here to do an important and responsible job, making the laws that set the parameters for people right across the United Kingdom. We can talk about the culture here, and about the environment and the bars, but does he agree that personal responsibility lies at the heart of this issue? Does he agree that individuals in all the parties should know better, that they should take personal responsibility and that they should act in an appropriate and respectful way towards everybody, regardless of the working hours, the bars and the restaurants?

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Lady, but I almost take that as a personal chastisement. I am sure that hon. Members will know that I sometimes enjoy a pint of the guest ale in the Strangers Bar, but she is absolutely right to say that this is all about personal behaviour. However, we have an unusual workplace where this is allowed. I do not know of any workplace in my constituency that has six bars as a normal feature. I think we have to recognise that the way in which this place has been designed—I am not just talking about the bars—can lead to difficulties, as we have begun to see in the past few years. The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex talked about how we had got to this point historically, and perhaps it has a little bit to do with how the House has been designed and constructed, as well as the way in which we do our business. It is worth looking at all those things.

The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex talked about training. The working group spent hours discussing that issue, and I think we reached a point at which consensus emerged on how it should appear in the report. I take the view that there should be compulsory training, and I supported the idea that there should be a kitemark for Members of Parliament who had been through such training. Members of staff looking around to see who they might want to work for would see the kitemark and know that that Member had been through the training. They would then have an expectation of a better workplace environment with that Member, compared with what they could expect from someone who rejected training out of hand and who there might be issues with. I thought that that was a good suggestion, although I could not convince the Leader of the House on that one. It was a proposal that came from some of the staff representatives on the group, and I think that we have to do this as a way forward.

Training will be mandatory for new Members of Parliament when they come into this place. The point was also made that most Members of Parliament have never been employers before. I was never an employer, and I think that that applies to most of us on the Opposition Benches who are perhaps from a more modest background, although perhaps less so to the denizens of business on the other side. I did not know how to manage staff when I first came here. I had to learn from experience and do it on the job. It would be helpful and useful to be given that training, not only on issues to do with equality but on how to be a good employer. There would be nothing wrong with that, and I welcome the recommendation that in the next Parliament, Members will be obliged to go through training.

The people who rush to do the training will be those of us who are interested in equality issues. I have no issue with taking training, and I look forward to doing
it, but the real question is how we are going to drag the old dinosaurs into it. There will be those who have a more traditional view of the workplace environment, which might influence their approach to employing members of staff. Perhaps the kitemark could be a way of distinguishing those who were prepared to undergo equality training from those who were not.

Jo Swinson: I hope to be able to encourage the hon. Gentleman, because I know that we went through so many drafts of the report. The proposal on the good employer standard is in paragraph 81 and also in paragraph 79. I was very happy that we reached the point of stating:

"Until such time as training is mandatory, records of those who have completed the recommended training will be publicly available."

I think that that will help to focus minds before the training becomes compulsory.

Pete Wishart: I agree. The kitemark suggestion is perhaps slightly different from what was eventually agreed, but of course I accept that, and it is a welcome addition to the report.

As you can probably sense, Mr Speaker, this is an important report, and it was certainly worth spending all those 100 hours on it over the past few months. I see it as being more than just a report of this House; it could be a blueprint for complex workplaces across the country. It could be the start of a permanent change in the culture of this place. There is no going back.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I am fascinated by the hon. Gentleman’s remarks about training and agree with about 99% of what he says. Will he comment further on how often people should renew training once it has been taken? Workplaces and legislation can change fast, and what was considered acceptable maybe 10 years or 15 years ago is no longer accepted, so I would be interested in his comments.

Pete Wishart: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, because the working group did not consider that. She is right that, such is the fast-changing nature of the workplace environment, people should be required to redo the training, because innovations do happen. I am looking around at colleagues from the working group and I cannot see any real objection to that suggestion, so the Leader of the House might consider it as we move forward and as the report evolves.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): We only have to look outside this place to realise that almost every other industry in the UK has something called continual professional development. If the dinosaurs do not like being dragged into that, they know what the alternative is.

Pete Wishart: That is a useful contribution. My workplace background was in a rock band, so I am not all that familiar with some of the things that have been going on in industry, but I will obviously take lessons from the hon. Gentleman, who seems to know what he is talking about.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is in a more reflective mood than the one he sometimes displays in the House, as befits this serious subject matter. He dealt with the topic seriously, so it is a great pleasure to follow his comments. I add my support to the motion moved by the Leader of the House and the report and proposals that back it up.

Several colleagues have referenced the events of last year that triggered this piece of work and set of proposals, but I want to put something on the record. Shortly after I became Government Chief Whip in 2015, there were several issues in the House, so I started this area of work with all the parties in the House to see whether we could improve how the House dealt with such issues. Parties obviously have their own processes, but for various reasons they do not command the confidence of Members. Conservative Members certainly were not entirely comfortable with processes that were controlled by political parties, and that view was also expressed by people who work in the House and those outside.

Even if a party-run process is fantastic, it simply would not command confidence, and it was clear in the views expressed to me by colleagues, from my conversations with Members from other parties and from the representatives of our staff who came to see me that a House process covering all Members of Parliament on a cross-party basis would be the best way to proceed. We started to set some of those processes in train, and it was to my disappointment that the European Union referendum intervened and terminated the career of David Cameron and, indeed, my career in government and that we were unable to bring those processes to fruition.

I was therefore very pleased—although not about why the Leader of the House had to put these processes in place—that she responded so strongly to the events that took place last year, both in Parliament and outside it. I was very pleased that the processes were put in train on a cross-party basis and that all parties took part. I am also pleased that we have come up with such a comprehensive report, which I have taken the trouble to study. I think that it will be a step forward.

Before I move on, I put on the record my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, who served as my deputy when I was Government Chief Whip. She would be too modest to say this herself, but while working with me, she led on many of these issues in that office. Government and, I think, Opposition colleagues know that she takes these matters very seriously. When she responded at the Dispatch Box to an urgent question—I think it was the one in response to the events at the Presidents Club—she made it very clear what her views were and how strongly
she feels about these matters. I wanted to ensure that my thanks to her were on the record for the work she did as Deputy Chief Whip.

Although it is clear from the things that have been talked about publicly and from the responses to the survey that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire mentioned that bullying and harassment can affect all members of staff, it affects female members of staff more severely than others. If we are to get more women to be Members of Parliament and to work in this House and be treated as equals, it is incredibly important to deal with this issue. Having taken up a position as co-chair of Women2Win, which tries to get more women to be Conservative Members of Parliament, I strongly support our taking further steps in this area, because it will encourage more women to be Members of Parliament.

I want to say a word or two about fairness. When the report was produced, there was some comment outside the House about the proposals meaning that the investigation of disciplinary matters would take place in private, without everything being published. That is like most workplaces. In most workplaces, when somebody makes a complaint about another employee, those matters are not published in national newspapers. I have always thought in this House—this was true when we were going through the difficulties with expenses—that a very good test is for Members of Parliament to be judged at least by the standards that we expect of everybody else. A good test is that the processes that we use to look at complaints about bullying and harassment should be the same sort of processes that exist in modern, up to the minute, leading workplaces. In those workplaces, one would not expect everything to be published in a national newspaper.

I welcome that the report refers to the need to recognise that sometimes when there are examples of bullying and harassment, there are patterns of behaviour and we need to ensure that other people have the confidence to come forward. Sometimes, it is only when people are aware that there is an issue with someone’s behaviour that they are willing to come forward. The report reflects that, but it is a difficult balance to get right, when we want to protect confidentiality to protect those who might be unfairly accused.

It is also the fact, which I think has been recognised publicly, that Members of Parliament do not employ large numbers of staff. If a complaint is made against a Member of Parliament and they are identified, it would not be difficult for newspapers to identify which of their members of staff had probably made the complaint. Having a disciplinary process take place in the full glare of publicity is not helpful for the Member of Parliament or for the complainant. The balance that is struck in the report is welcome.

I want to respond to what the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said about the Standards Committee. Her issue about MPs marking their own homework would have been a reasonable point if the lay members do not vote. Although I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman having their say, it would be a step forward. I still have concerns that MPs will be seen to be voting on their colleagues, even if we have had a perfectly independent and good procedure up until that point. I still think that is a weakness.

Mr Harper: We just need to think through how this works. The ultimate sanction of either expelling a MP or suspending them for a period where the recall provisions would kick in would be a decision for the House, not for the Committee on Standards—the whole House would be voting on it. Obviously, the House would be furnished with the report from the parliamentary commissioner and the report from the Committee on Standards. The valuable change we made when we introduced lay members was making MPs aware that, even if the MPs on the Committee had taken a certain view, the lay members can have their views expressed in the report of the Committee.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab) indicated assent.

Mr Harper: I see the Chairman of the Committee nodding, so I have got that right. That provision gives both the wider House and members of the public confidence that the information put before the House is not just the views of MPs; it is also the views of lay members of the Committee. That brings a useful check on our views about what is and is not appropriate behaviour.

Mr Jenkin: My right hon. Friend is right to say that having the lay members present when decisions are made gives the Committee on Standards more authority, but there is something odd about the Committee adjudicating on rules and evidence—that should be done by a lawyer. These decisions would have much more authority if they were handed to the Committee by someone with the right juridical experience and standing, and the Committee was told, “This is the judgment. If you overturn this, you are overturning a respectable legal opinion. On your own head be it.”

Mr Harper: I listen carefully to what my hon. Friend says and put a fair bit of weight on it, given that he chairs the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, but I do not entirely agree with that. I have taken the trouble over the years to read the reports of the Committee on Standards, particularly the serious ones, and the reports of the parliamentary commissioner. The thing that has always struck me—I do not know whether other Members have thought this—is the thoroughness with which the parliamentary commissioner has looked into serious allegations. I have often thought to myself, “If you were ever tempted not to uphold the very high standards of behaviour, you really would not want to be subject to that level of scrutiny, because it is fairly exacting.”

I do not know whether Members have looked at these reports, but I can tell them that the parliamentary commissioner goes into things in considerable detail. The reports that are put before the Committee on Standards by the parliamentary commissioner are very thorough and detailed. There is a perception outside the House about the view that MPs on that Committee take, but when I have read its reports I have always felt...
they have been very balanced, tough and fair. When one reads them, one finds that it is not clear that there is any bias coming into them from the party views of the MPs. I have always thought that system is a pretty good one. As I have said, the only gap in it was rectified by the addition of lay members, who bring that useful outside perspective and check. But I listened carefully to what my hon. Friend said and I am sure it will be reflected upon by the House more widely.

Mr Jenkin: We have had one case in which the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and the Committee on Standards reached one view, but when the same issue was then challenged in the courts a judge took a much harsher view. That completely undermines the authority of the system we have, and we need a much more legalistic approach to the adjudication of rules and evidence, whatever punishments the Committee may have decided to hand out.

Mr Harper: I hear what my hon. Friend says. I do not entirely agree with him, but I do not wish to deviate from this debate into a wider discussion of standards.

My final point is about training and culture. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire made a sensible point about MPs’ backgrounds, but I wish to pick up on his slightly prejudicial comment that assumed that everybody on the Government Benches has a privileged background, which is entirely not true. I will not bore him with the fact that I was the first person in my family to go to university, my father was a labourer and we had certainly not had any Members of Parliament in the family before—I just want to challenge the hon. Gentleman’s prejudices—but he made a sensible point: MPs have a very varied set of backgrounds. Some have run their own businesses and employed significant numbers of people. Some, like me, have worked in a business for others, and I have experience of managing teams. Others will come to the House having never managed anybody before in their lives.

Members obviously come to the House at a variety of ages and with a variety of other experiences. We are all then plunged into employing members of staff. As the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), said, Members come to the House with the very best of intentions but often do not have the required skills. We therefore need to improve the training on how to employ and manage people and on the expectations that we set. We also need to provide HR support not only proactively, so that Members are better trained and supported, but so that we have somebody to ask questions if there are challenging issues that we are not comfortable dealing with. That would be valuable.

I welcome the recommendation that training should be part of the induction process for new Members. I do not think there is a massive gap between the position of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) and that of my hon. Friend. The Member for Harwich and North Essex. I think that everybody should go through the training, but the challenge is that we can mandate that everyone goes to a training course and physically turns up at the room, but we cannot mandate that they will listen attentively and change their behaviour after doing so. It seems to me that the people who are least likely to go to the training are probably those most in need of it.

As the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire said, the challenge is to persuade people that they should go on the training course, listen and change their behaviour. The proposals to which the hon. Lady referred on publicising whether people had been on the training course, so that there is peer pressure and people feel they should go and so that the staff they might wish to hire put pressure on them, are a good idea. Nevertheless, for new MPs, it should be part of the standard set of training that every Member undertakes, so that we set the expectations correctly.

That leads me to the second part of my final point, which is about the culture of this place. I have listened to the debates we have had on this issue over the past few months and thought about my own working career. I was perhaps fortunate to work for two businesses that took management and how they treated their people very seriously. I went on training courses on how to manage people and set expectations and on what was expected. Staff members were empowered to speak up, and it was recognised that speaking up on a whole range of issues—whether how we ran the business or how people behaved—was the right thing to do. That set the right sort of culture, which is not always the case.

I have thought through some of the comments that have been made over the past few months. Examples of behaviour have been given and people have said things like, “That sort of behaviour was acceptable a few years ago, but things seem to have changed.” I thought back to when I started my working after leaving university, which is tragically a lot longer ago than I care to remember, in 1991. I thought through some of the specific examples we have read about, and whether they involved Members of this House or people outside it, we heard people say, “This sort of behaviour used to be acceptable.”

I was thinking back to when I started work 27 years ago, and I concluded that, actually, those sorts of things were not acceptable. The difference between then and more recently is that people used to get away with behaving like that. What has changed is not that certain behaviours are no longer acceptable—actually they never were acceptable—but that people cannot get away with them now, and that is right and an improvement. What we are trying to deliver with the training and the change of culture is that everybody accepts not only that those sorts of behaviour are not acceptable, but that no one will let people get away with them.

Rachel Maclean: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Harper: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I am just going to conclude.

If the report of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House does nothing else but that and changes the culture, it will have taken us a huge step forward. I am very happy to support the motion and to commend it to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I want to make sure that everybody gets equal time. Working on the basis that we have seven people and that we have until 5.40, we should have around 10 minutes each. I think that that will be helpful to everybody.
Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I beg to move amendment (a), after "others," insert "in consultation with the Committee on Standards and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards."

The Committee on Standards has discussed the working group’s report and authorised me yesterday to write to the Leader of the House setting out its unanimous view. The letter was published on the Committee’s website. The Committee welcomes the report and strongly supports its commitment to zero tolerance of sexual harassment, bullying and harassment within the parliamentary community.

Members will have seen that an amendment, which was tabled yesterday, was signed by all the elected members of the Committee, calling for the Committee on Standards and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to be formally consulted as part of the process of implementing the working group’s recommendations.

We were a little surprised not to have been mentioned in the motion, as the House has given the Committee and the Commissioner important roles in dealing with the conduct of Members. May I say to the Leader of the House—I am sure I can say this on behalf of all members of the Committee—that I welcome what she said earlier in relation to the Standards Committee and the Parliamentary Commissioner being involved in future work.

The House should take note of the fact that we are currently carrying out a long-planned review of the code of conduct, which will be announced in due course. The current review will obviously be informed by the working group’s report. As Members have said, the Committee is unique among Select Committees in containing lay members. Those lay members, along with the Commissioner, provide a much-needed element of independence in the current standards system.

May I just react to one or two exchanges that have taken place this afternoon? It is true to say that lay members are not allowed to vote. That was the wish not of the Standards Committee at the time we set up the first three lay members many years ago, but of this House. My understanding is that the House did not want to bring the law inside this place and inside its Committees.

The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) has been talking about bringing in the law. As I understand it, that would be a big step. I think the reason why lay members were not given a vote was that we were advised that we could not take them on without bringing the law into the Committee system. I still think that if we are going to legislate on that at any stage, we should give that some consideration.

Mr Jenkin rose—

Mr Jenkin: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I think he knows the case to which I was referring. I will not name it, because it is too tiresome. It was a case in which the Committee adjudicated on someone who then tried to make the same case in a court of law under a completely separate jurisdiction, and he lost his case. He was also criticised by Ofcom. The point is that the proposals that PACAC has made are not about bringing the judiciary into our own proceedings—this is not about that—but about the House appointing our own legal person to make these adjudications on behalf of the House, and on behalf of his Committee so that he has a far more unimpeachable judgment handed to his Committee on which to act than he is compelled to work with at the moment.

Sir Kevin Barron: I think I now know the case that the hon. Gentleman is talking about. The person in question did not agree with what happened to him, and he went to court and got nowhere. If it is the case I am thinking about, the court supported exactly what the Committee had said about the individual involved. Let me move on.

As hon. Members will know, the current system has developed as a series of merely reactive measures in response initially to the cash for questions scandal in the 1990s and, more recently, to the Members’ expenses scandal. This means that it is arguably skewed too much towards issues of financial impropriety—important though they are—and neglects other aspects of Members’ conduct and behaviour towards other people.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The right hon. Gentleman mentions financial impropriety, but the challenge that we now face, particularly in relation to sexual harassment, is finding the balance between Members’ personal lives and the time spent actually conducting their parliamentary duties. Does he foresee any questions about that as we implement these policies?

Sir Kevin Barron: That issue has to be looked at. I think the hon. Lady was there when I gave evidence to the working group. I finished by mentioning a case that was in the media in October last year, and said that this House will have to come to a decision on what is a personal and private activity and what is not. That is something that we may be asked to do in the coming months.

Over the years, the Independent Standards Commissioner and the Standards Committee have done their best to try to address this imbalance, and have looked at possible ways of updating the current code of conduct, particularly in relation to issues arising from Members’ conduct. In the past, the House has resisted attempts to incorporate some of these changes, but I am glad that the working group’s report has given fresh impetus to developing a more comprehensive system of standards and behaviour.

The Committee contains a pool of expertise on the part of both elected and lay members that we believe will be of real value in developing the new processes. We are keen to be of assistance, and I am pleased to say that we now have a meeting in the diary with the Leader of the House to discuss how we can help. In my letter to the Leader of the House, I comment that
My letter sets out what these are, so I will not detain the House long in summarising them.

We will need to consider how the new arrangements will work alongside the existing system. It is crucial that the new systems should be seen to operate fairly and impartially. Due process is important because it secures the rights of everyone involved. One proposal in the report—that a parliamentary investigation might proceed in parallel with police inquiries—would represent a clear breach with the existing practice, which is set out in a memorandum of understanding between the Committee, the commissioner and the Metropolitan police, so it will require careful consideration. The implications of the report’s proposals on anonymity will need to be thought about carefully. All of this is clearly a matter for future discussion. The Committee and the commission are likely to be involved in the sixth workstream mentioned by the Leader of the House.

Today I simply want to express the Committee’s support for what the working group is trying to achieve, and to assure the House that the commissioner, my colleagues and I are committed to working closely with the steering group to turn the new system into reality as soon as possible.

Comments were made earlier about the lay members not having a vote in the Committee. It is many years since there has been a vote in the Standards Committee. We work on the basis of getting the agreement of all members. But when the Committee agrees a report, each one of the seven lay members is asked whether they want to put down anything other than what is included in the report. That has never happened yet. They have far more power, each individual one of them, than the seven elected members put together. I hope that the House begins to understand that and stops repeating that this Committee is marking its own homework.

It is not. It is a Committee of this House with lay members. We should be looking at having lay members on other Committees as well. I argued for this for many years before we actually got it. I sat on the General Medical Council as a lay member, sitting in judgment on doctors and other health professionals on occasion. We should not be afraid of bringing lay members here and giving them the respect they deserve. The Committee is independent, notwithstanding the absence of a vote.

4.10 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a great privilege and pleasure to contribute to this debate, and to follow the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) and all the others who have spoken on this very important topic.

Having been very lucky to be elected chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, I am very interested in this debate, because of course we all support women entering Parliament and want to encourage and see more of it. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) for what they have done to further this cause on the Conservative Benches. I know that there are many champions of women in all parts of the House. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) talked about the issues of patriarchy in this place. We ought to be proud, however, that we have a number of incredibly competent women in this House—I see them sitting in all parts of the Chamber—who are more than capable of holding their own despite the patriarchy. It is also important that we signal to people who wish to enter this place that they are going to be welcomed when they get here.

I want to touch on the issue of culture. My experience comes from running my own business. I do not come from an exalted or privileged background; I got here through hard work in starting my own business and experiencing many failures and setbacks. It is a bit of a misconception that everyone who runs their own business, or works in a business, is somehow privileged. In the process, I learned about managing teams. The main thing that I learned, from a very trusted mentor, was that culture eats strategy for breakfast. It is about the culture and the leadership. We can have as many reports, processes or training schemes as we want, but if that is not followed through, and lived and breathed by deeds not words, I am afraid that we might as well all give up and go home.

We have seen a fantastic response to this issue. I pay tribute to the Leader of the House and all the others who have played their part and thank them very much. This is such a long-standing issue that addressing it is long overdue. It is a credit to all involved that the bull has now been taken by the horns. I really do hope that this can percolate upwards to the very highest level. All political leaders in all parts of this House absolutely need to live and breathe it.

The reason this is so important is that our staff are very vulnerable. They are, relatively speaking—perhaps not all of them, but some of them—quite young. They do not come here with a lot of experience of other workplaces. For some, this is the first place that they have worked. With a young woman and perhaps an older man, or any man, there is a very sensitive issue of gender imbalance. It can be very difficult for a young woman, or a young man, in their first job to tackle that—to have the confidence to raise it and know that it will be taken seriously. The root of the matter—I am really grateful for the consideration that has been given to this point—is power and the abuse of power, and how easily that can be very detrimental to young people who are vulnerable because they are working in this unique workplace and supporting us in our challenging duties.

Leadership is absolutely critical and essential. I hope that we can all play our part by holding our colleagues to account, however we do it. The issue of training also needs to be taken forward. It is not enough to train just once.

I have the great delight of having two psychology degrees, and I worked in HR for many years. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean, I have had a lot of training—I actually was the person giving the training—on how to manage staff. It is one thing to ask people to change, but change is painful. There are people in this House who have been behaving in certain ways, possibly for decades. Change is difficult, and it is really hard to make organisational change stick. We need to pay close attention to that.
We need to be united in our determination to drive this through, for the benefit of all the people who work here and all the people who are looking to us to be examples. I end by again expressing my gratitude for the work that has been done, which I hope will lead to positive change.

4.15 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a delight to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). It sounds as though she has some excellent skills and perspectives that will be important in the consultation about how to make this organisational culture change stick.

As a member of the working group, I very much welcome the motion and the debate. As well as making specific comments on what we put in the report, I want to talk about the wider context. We have come at this issue in Parliament from the events at the end of last year, which followed hot on the heels of the Weinstein scandal, and in recent weeks we have heard about the issues in the charity sector. An important point for us all to remember is that this is not a problem in any one specific industry. This problem is endemic across society and every sector. It is important that we get our house in order with our own procedures, but we also need to understand the wider perspective and the wider societal cultural change that, as parliamentarians, we have a role in leading. That is why it is vital that what we do is of an excellent quality and can act as a beacon to other organisations and institutions that are trying to grapple with similar issues.

Of course, for all that we have seen these cases in politics hit the headlines, I am painfully aware of how many women are in positions with so much less power than those connected to this place—women working in low-paid jobs—who cases do not hit the headlines. We read in the briefing from the Young Women’s Trust that three in 10 young women have experienced sexual harassment at work. This is happening all over the country.

The working group was a generally positive experience, if occasionally frustrating, but that was partly because we were grappling with difficult issues. I would like to praise the contribution of the staff, particularly the three representatives of staff who work for Members in various parties and the experts who advised the group. I for one learned a huge amount from listening to what they had to offer and the wisdom they had to impart.

These issues are not easy to deal with. We all come to them saying that we want to deal with them and get it right, but there are sensitive issues to work through. The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) talked about confidentiality. On the one hand, if names are published, that might encourage others to come forward and we might spot more patterns. On the other hand, that might discourage some people from coming forward because of the fear that their anonymity will be breached. We had a lot of discussions about how we work through that and how we deal with historical allegations and people who have already gone through a different process and are very upset with how that went. There are no answers to some of these questions.

We also discussed at length the interplay with the criminal justice system. While we want to ensure there is support for people who want to pursue a criminal conviction in a case of sexual assault, for example, we recognise that in the survey we did, a tiny proportion of people—I think it was 2%—said that they would feel comfortable to go to the police in those circumstances. We looked clearly at how we could provide people with support if they wanted to do that, but we also looked at how we could give them control, so that if they wanted the case to be pursued as a grievance and effectively as a matter of professional conduct, it could be dealt with as an employment issue, rather than their being forced to have faith in our criminal justice system, which they may not have.

It is because this is not easy that the review clauses we have suggested are so essential. I am very confident that what we propose today will make things much better. I am also very confident that it will not be perfect. It will only improve things if we make sure we review it regularly and learn from what works well. There may well also be cases where it does not work well, and we need to make sure we take those lessons on board and not be overly defensive about that.

I also want to touch on the issue of gender. Harassment, bullying and sexual harassment happen to men as well as to women, but we know from our survey that they happen to women more often. The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) posed an essential question: how did we let this happen? Part of my answer to that is that this institution was designed by men and built for men, and for the largest part of its existence, it has been run by men and made up almost exclusively of men. Therefore, the place of women within the institution, whether in this Chamber or among the staff who support our work, has not been viewed as equal.

As women in Parliament, we have all experienced being talked over in meetings, questioned about whether we are allowed to be somewhere—whether we have the right to be on the Terrace, or in a particular lift during a Division—and asked whether we are a researcher or a cleaner, instead of a Member of Parliament. A woman journalist bravely reported that somebody said to her, “Here comes the totty.” We now know that many other women journalists have experienced similar, and indeed worse, treatment from people in this place. When I was a Minister, I learned of a former Minister from the House of Lords who had engaged with his male private office staff but refused to speak to or take seriously the female staff, even when they were more senior, because they happened to be women. We know that these things happen.

I was really struck by the Young Women’s Trust briefing, which states that 89% of women MPs and 58% of men MPs say that sexism still exists in Parliament. That gulf is significant. Almost all women know that there are still instances of sexism, but only just over half of men recognise that. That gulf is part of the problem, and it is part of the reason for the complacency that still exists. We are talking only about gender, but there is a layering of race, LGBTI and socioeconomic barriers and disadvantage that all come together in this place.

Not every man does it, but this kind of behaviour is present in every single political party, and we all experience it and see it from time to time. It is not just a few bad apples; it is cultural. We all—women, too—have the capacity to make these assumptions or thoughtless comments. When we are in a position of power, those comments have so much more force, and we have an
extra responsibility to be aware of that. I say to all Members of the House, including myself, that often when these things happen, they are tolerated. Someone will roll their eyes, or they will be embarrassed, but the behaviour is not always called out because doing so may feel uncomfortable or inconvenient, or it may be easier not to rock the boat. Part of what we need to do is to challenge and tackle that culture throughout our work in this place.

I want to touch on a couple of issues in the report. The behaviour code will be the foundation of what we do. It needs the widest possible involvement of Members and staff, and of passholders who are not in those categories, to ensure that it is built on a shared sense of values. That is vital to ensuring that it has the resonance that we need it to have so that people really buy into it.

There has been quite a lot of discussion about training, which I think is essential. For anyone who employs staff, such training should be part of what they have to do to access funds from IPSA to pay somebody. Training is also needed on harassment and issues of consent.

When I did an interview on the day the report was released, I was challenged on the “Today” programme by John Humphrys, who said, “Surely, MPs know what is appropriate behaviour.” If that were universally the case, we would not be in this situation. There is no room for complacency. The #MeToo movement shows us that. It is, incidentally, why I think we need consent for complacency. The #MeToo movement shows us that.

Mr Jenkin: The hon. Lady is making such a good speech, particularly when it comes to the point about assumptions. If we want to change culture, everyone has to stop making assumptions about their own beliefs and other people’s. We need to talk about that and get it into the open, without judgment. I agree with her wholeheartedly about training for MPs who employ staff. Ultimately, if an MP has not been through a basic training package, why should the taxpayer allow them to employ their own staff?

Jo Swinson: I would welcome the hon. Gentleman’s support on those points.

Some of what we experience on these issues of harassment is undoubtedly deliberate—done with intent and entirely with knowledge—but some is inadvertent. It is to tackle that complacency that the training is so essential. There will be people who sometimes do not understand the impact of all the words they use. I attended a recent session on anti-Semitism by the Holocaust Educational Trust, which was fascinating, and the more we can listen and learn from the experiences of others, the more that will help us to engage in a more mature way on these issues.

That cultural change is important. Sarah Childs, as the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) outlined, produced an excellent report in “The Good Parliament”. She recommended ways in which we could change the culture. She also gave evidence, and she talked about challenging the exceptionalism of MPs—that we think we are in some kind of unique scenario. Yes, there are many elements of our job that are very unusual, but that should not be some kind of excuse for not having basic professional standards. That might be about good employment relationships; if we had good employment practice, that would deal in large part—not entirely, but in large part—with the problems we experience here. It might also be about the macho approach to late-night situations, which are some kind of badge of pride—the parliamentary equivalent of having a jacket on the back of the chair in the office. That is not how modern workplaces are effective, so that cultural change is essential.

I agree with the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) that we need as fast as possible to extend the behavioural code to Members of Parliament and staff of Parliament, wherever they are when they are in that role and carrying out their duties—whether they are in their constituency, in an office or at some event, or whether they are here in Parliament.

I know that others want to speak, so, in conclusion, let me say that the problems that we are facing are not unique to Parliament, but we all have our part to play in dealing with them. This motion and this report are an important first step. They will lead to a real improvement and hopefully help us to get our own house in order.

4.26 pm  

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I, like everybody else, want to commend the work that was done by the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and everybody else on the working group. One hundred hours—I would definitely have lost the will to live halfway through the negotiations. Everybody worked really, really hard.

The report has been done relatively quickly for this place; it is the quickest thing I have known go through since I have been here. There are just a few slight concerns I want to raise about how we might take this forward, but, by and large, the work that has been done is brilliant, particularly when there are often not easy answers to the anonymity and privacy issues. This is not easy; people outside this building can say these things are easy, but when you are actually here, it is quite different.

We talk about the events of last November and those being the reason we are all here. I want to say thank you to Ava Etemadzadeh, Jane Merrick, Bex Bailey and Kate Maltby, who all had the guts to come forward and say that people who were powerful had not always behaved the best with them. They deserve huge praise and merit.

I have concerns about the issue of representation during any process on sexual harassment. The Leader of the House said both parties would be entitled to representation, which is absolutely as it should be—and fair—in every system in the land, whether that is trade union representation or legal representation. However, I have a concern about how we will make sure in this place that there is equality of arms in that representation. If a caseworker is working in one of our offices, and a very wealthy peer, for example, sexually harasses them, I worry that one of those people has very good representation and can frighten people with legal letters—I have received some myself in these past few months. It worries me greatly that there will be an unfair imbalance. If the Weinstein issue teaches us anything, it is that rich
men know how to use the law to get away with murder. We need to make sure that we address that all the way through this process.

I also have one slight issue about the independence of MPs as decision makers. That is now in regard to them marking their own homework—I did not even know anything about the lay members until today, and I am satisfied with the explanations I have heard. However, in the report, one of the decision-making lines is that if a member of our staff perpetrates sexual harassment, bullying or harassment, we are one of the decision makers. I, as the employer, would be the decision-maker. That seems completely acceptable—that is what it would be like in the outside world. As the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) put it, that is the same standard as that used for other employers. In this place, however, we are in close quarters with our employees. I employ only one person here and she is very, very close to me. I feel incredible loyalty to her. When I walk around this building, I see Members’ partners and children working here. I am not entirely sure that a Member of Parliament could be completely and utterly without bias in a case against a member of their staff, and that definitely needs to be looked into.

Andrea Leadsom: I hope to be able to reassure the hon. Lady, because we did come up against this issue. As she rightly says, there are some unusually close relationships in this place. Clearly, however, where there is a finding against somebody who is employed by a Member of Parliament, and the finding goes to that Member of Parliament and they fail to take action, the complainant will be able to take that Member of Parliament to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards for failing to fulfil their role as an employer. I hope that reassures the hon. Lady.

Jess Phillips: That does reassure me to some degree. My concern is that the complainant, as is always the case in such instances, has to do an awful lot of work. We need to make sure that they are supported all the way through the process. There is also the issue of equality of arms. As Members, we are much more powerful than most people and we are much more frightened than most people. [Interruption.] I am, that’s right! I would like to think that I can recognise that and employ it appropriately, but I still worry that there will be a power imbalance. The working group has done everything it possibly could do on a matter that is very difficult, and I imagine there were lots of voices on both sides. I will finish by just saying that I totally commend the report.

Mr Jenkin rose—

Jess Phillips: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman, who is loquacious today.

Mr Jenkin: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, because I think she rightly points to the necessity that, as employers, MPs, because we are public figures, must be held to a much higher standard than we would expect of an ordinary small businessman and employer outside. That is because we are accountable, we are expected to be accountable and we are expected to be leaders and example-setters. I think, however, that the report addresses that and her concerns, because there will be HR support from outside the Members’ office for the staff of Members of Parliament, so they get the support and counselling they need to take a complaint against their employer in a way that has not existed before. I think it is a very important reform.

Jess Phillips: I totally recognise that and I am very happy with the progress that has been made. I personally felt listened to throughout the process, and I thank the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader for that. The system will need to be tested as we go through it. Lots of people have talked about review. It will be strength-tested by those who go through it. We have to ensure that, when the first case comes and things have not been as they should have been, we do not close ranks with each other. I will always commit to being the person who closes ranks with the people on the outside. I commend the report.

4.34 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Abraham Lincoln said:

“Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”

What we have been talking about today is what happens when men—and it does tend to be mainly men—have power and how power can be misused. In that sense, I start by paying tribute to the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and all those who, in those 100 hours, looked at the issue in that vein, recognising that this is about the many different ways in which power can be abused, because this place is powerful and full of powerful people.

I started the morning at a school in Walthamstow, taking part in an assembly on sexual harassment. It is a very sobering moment to think, “What do I tell the younger women of our country about sexual harassment in 2018, in the environment of #MeToo, Harvey Weinstein, Larry Nassar and what we have seen in our charity sector?” Each of us may be individually responsible for what we do today about the motion and for what happens next, but we have a wider remit for our young people that involves recognising that it is simply not enough to pay lip service by saying, “This shouldn’t be happening.” It is about asking, “What are we all doing to make sure that this never happens again?”

The message that we send out from Parliament—we know that this work must continue—has wider ramifications, because it sets a bar for other agencies. None of us here can claim that Parliament has covered itself in glory. We have been too slow. We have let the idea develop that it is somehow about leading a horse to water, rather than recognising that some of those donkeys have no place in our political process. Now is our opportunity to say that we are going to make a stand, not just in Parliament but across public life, because it matters to those girls. It matters that they have the freedom that we would want for them all to realise their potential, without thinking, “This is the kind of workplace that I might go into.”

In the run-up to International Women’s Day, I will mention four points that I hope the Leader of the House will take on board, bearing in mind that many us have been called shouty feminists today—I hope that this shout will come loud and full. First and foremost, on training, I understand where the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) is coming from. For many years, we have been inspiring each other on issues of gender equality and feminism. I understand
Stella Creasy

his point about catching more flies with honey than vinegar, but with something like this, it is probably the people who are most resistant who are the most likely to need to change. We need to recognise that we cannot simply keep asking nicely and then apologise to the people who have to deal with the consequences. That is why having sex and relationships education for every young person in this country matters, and I hope that all of us will renew our resolve not to backslide on that now, because we can see that breaking the culture, so that we do not have to deal with this, needs to start as early as possible.

My second point to the Leader of the House is that this has to fit into the wider context. People do not end up as passholders here by accident. That is not just about Members of Parliament, but about our political parties and our political culture. How do people get involved in activism? How do they get employed? Although the Leader of the House has to look at the culture in Parliament, inevitably it is one piece of the jigsaw puzzle about how people become involved in public life. I pay tribute to the women who have come forward as part of the LabourToo campaign to give their stories. That tells us that we have work to do within our own political movement. I do not think that that is unique to the Labour movement; it probably goes across political parties. This process will be only as good as those who are coming into political activism, and political activism will be only as good as the environment that we create for our volunteers and activists. One of my questions, therefore, is: how do we fit this in with the broader work on making sure that there is no hiding place for the people who seek to abuse power?

My third point is about what happens when we find people who have behaved inappropriately. As the Leader of the House knows, I have persistently asked her about recall, and I am so pleased to see that it is now on the agenda. I believe that we have to have the sanction—the sanction that none of us wants to admit to, but know needs to be in the process—for when somebody is found to have behaved in these ways. We have heard questions today about where the standards board might come into this and whether there is a case for taking the initial decisions about sanctions out of the standards board altogether. Instead, it would be given information from an independent third party who would then advise lay members and MPs, so that we can take out any suggestion that political favour or fear of the consequences of recall would be part of the decision. If recall is the right course of action, it should be on the table, and it should be on the table because the transgression is serious enough that the local community that the person represents needs the right to say something. None of us wants to send one of these young girls to see their MP, as would be their right, knowing that that person has behaved in a way that we would not countenance in any other workplace.

My fourth point, simply, is that we know that this is yet another staging post. The shadow Leader of the House was so right when she said that this is the fourth time that we have debated this matter. We know that there is much more work to do. I pledge my support for the Leader and the shadow Leader in keeping going. I fear that some in this place, including those accused of things, are hoping that, after the tidal wave has subsided, this issue will go away and life will go back to normal. Let us not make 2018 like 2017; let us make it the point when the sands shift, and that means keeping going and seeing these cases through, as difficult and awkward as that might be—because they might involve people we care about deeply. We owe the young women I spoke with today so much more, but that is at least something we can promise them.

4.40 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): As one of the members of the cross-party working group and the leader of Plaid Cymru’s Westminster team, I wish to congratulate everyone involved in this timely, long-drawn-out and, at times, demanding task.

It is worth stating some of the obvious facts that have brought us here. This policy has come about following co-operation between politicians representing all the parties in the House and representatives of staff employed here and trade unions. In particular, I commend the many witnesses who spoke to us and the specialist adviser on sexual harassment, Dr Helen Mott, as well as the Leader of the House for her able and patient work in chairing the working group—and that from the Opposition Benches!

The policy before us today represents a critical step in transforming Westminster into a 21st-century workplace. Again, let us take a moment to state the obvious and consider how ineffective we would be without the staff, including office staff, who hold things together, balance constantly conflicting demands and enable us to present composed and competent faces in our public lives. The flip side is that this is a highly pressurised, tiring and emotional environment, and there is potentially always a toxic mix of power, ambition and vulnerability, much of which is played out behind closed doors.

The de-sexualisation of this and any workplace is simply a matter of equality, and just as with the line between assertiveness and bullying, much of our discussion is around our fear of where we draw the line. The unique nature of the terms and conditions for MPs’ staff, who, as we have heard, are employed directly by MPs, has meant that until now their last resort for complaint was either their MP or their MP’s party, which is why the independent nature of the complaints and grievance policy is so significant. Political parties must, of course, ensure that their own grievance policies are fair and without prejudice, but the question of whose interests are best served will always remain in those routes.

None the less, as is obvious from these discussions, some of which have been quite sophisticated, work still needs to be done over and above today’s recommendations. We need urgently to address the question of how to include visitors to constituency offices, and there is also the important question of how to decide when and where Members, their staff and all those to whom this is applied are engaged in parliamentary duties, be that here in Westminster, in our constituencies or on visits here and abroad. We need clarity on that to ensure fairness.

This will be a quasi-judicial process weighing up the pros and cons and the views of two people necessarily in conflict. There has been some discussion about the role of the Standards Committee, and the report anticipates changes, including to the voting arrangements on the
Committee. We are doing our best to merge House structures with cultural change, which will be challenging, but we have struck the best balance we can and will be moving ahead with the arrangements.

I urge that there be a high-profile campaign to inform staff about the new human resources facility—we know it exists, since we have talked about it, but we need to remind people as and when they need it—and about the independent complaints policy and the other working group proposals, with a particular emphasis on our staff in constituency offices, who are not necessarily part of the discussions and talking groups we have here. That process of informing new staff should continue into the future; it should not be a one-off event. Making effective human resources facilities available to Members’ staff will address problems that may be minor or mundane, but will also prevent those problems from escalating.

There has been a fair amount of discussion about training today, and I think it important to depersonalise that issue. There has been a rather personal, individualistic approach to training, but it is not a threat to individuals; it is a way in which we, corporately—as an entire body—can bring about change. This is about corporate leadership. What I particularly commend in the report is the ability of politicians to rein in that inclination to feel concern as individuals: the inclination to over-emphasise the potential for political motivation in complaints. It has maintained the balance between supporting complainants and resisting an over-emphasis on malicious and vexatious complaints.

The measure of the success of these initiatives will be a change from a dated culture of deference and outdated power structures to a culture of respect among equals working together in our many parliamentary workplaces, wherever they may be. Their future success will require rigorous implementation and rigorous monitoring. Just as, on a number of occasions, the contribution of staff and union representatives served as the glue that held the working group together, it is essential for staff and the representatives of all their unions to be involved in the future monitoring. These policies are not complete—they will evolve in practice and in review—but I am confident that they are the catalysts for change.

4.46 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a sad irony that, in a year that marks the 100th anniversary of the first women winning the vote, Parliament has been under the spotlight as a place in which women, in particular, face so much harassment and mistreatment. As we know, one in five people working in Westminster report that they have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment in the past 12 months, and twice as many women as men report incidents of harassment. It was a privilege to serve on the cross-party working group that was set up to respond to that routine sexual misconduct and, indeed, the concurrent routine failure to handle complaints either fairly or, in some cases, at all. I join others in paying particular tribute to the Leader of the House for her leadership and commitment to seeking consensus on the recommendations from the working group.

The report will set up a support system where previously there was none. It will also set in train the process of establishing an independent framework in which complaints can be heard. Crucially, anyone who reports sexual misconduct will have access to a complaints process that is specifically designed to differentiate between such cases and bullying. That was the first and arguably the most important change that the working group pressed for. Complainants will have access to someone with expertise in supporting those who have experienced sexual misconduct—someone who understands that complainants must be in control when it comes to the next steps and who will fight for their rights to be upheld.

Parliament should lead by example and not take yet more power away from those who make complaints, as happens repeatedly elsewhere. I am pleased that that is reflected in the working group’s recommendations. I think that this is progress, and it was possible largely because one of the country’s best-qualified experts in sexual harassment had an advisory role on the group, which meant that our work and decisions were informed by both evidence and best practice. Huge thanks must go to her, but also to the whole secretariat for its tireless work and to all the experts who supported us. I agree with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) about the importance of the participation of staff representatives in our deliberations: it made the process far more effective and inclusive.

A complainant-centred approach is just the start of this procedure. The next steps are of equal importance, especially the question of sanctions. To some extent that is in the hands of political parties, and I welcome the commitment that all the parties have made to reviewing and improving their own processes. We in the Green party have committed ourselves to referring sexual harassment cases to an external body with relevant expertise. That is how we will try to ensure that there is independence and transparency.

I would like to make the case, however, that smaller parties are at something of a disadvantage in resourcing those more robust systems for training and constant evaluation, and I ask that Parliament be encouraged to look at this on the grounds that there should be some element of funding for political parties and this will be a good place to start. I made that point at the working group meetings. Previous complainants and MPs have told me that they have zero confidence in their parties dealing with cases fairly or taking appropriate action against perpetrators and that the threat of a by-election will be enough to kill off the prospect of suspension or other sanctions.

A vast amount of work must be done to overcome the years of sweeping under the carpet that have brought us to a place of such distrust and despair. No political party is perfect, and I am certain that my party will have its ongoing learning to do as confidence in procedure and a more vocal discourse on harassment rightly encourages more people to come forward. Today, I want to pay tribute to Labour and, in particular, to all the women who have shown the courage to raise this in the Labour party. The challenge for all political parties is to be brave enough to accept that no party or organisation is exempt from this, but that together we can work to challenge the culture of harassment and it can be changed if we are committed enough to doing that, and we must prioritise the voices of those coming forward over party reputation.
The working group is clear, however, that many people experiencing sexual misconduct would not be protected by party policies even if those policies were the very best possible. That is why we have recommended the development of a shared and binding behaviour code that covers everyone working in Parliament, including all MPs, peers and parliamentary staff. That code, which will be developed in the coming months, is absolutely crucial. Volunteers, staff employed by political parties, contractors and officials working in Parliament will all be entitled and held to the same high standards of treatment, and it will cover behaviour in any designated place of work, or in the course of parliamentary duties or activities at home and, crucially, also abroad. The working group was not able in the timescale to reach agreement on how best to protect visitors to constituency offices, but I was reassured that the Leader of the House said earlier in the debate that that would be a priority for her.

We have had quite a bit of debate about the role of the Standards Committee, and while I appreciate that the inclusion of lay members on it improves the situation, the recommendation in the report about looking again at how it works is important. There is a risk of how this looks to people looking in from outside this place, and if it seems to them that the outcome of the complaint is in the hands of politicians who might well have a vested interest in not taking it any further, that will undermine all the good work we have done to date. There may be a perception that the system is left open to abuse by the Whips or political parties, the political string pullers and the other career makers or breakers. That flies in the face of what constitutes best practice and is utterly at odds with the stand-out principle of an independent system that underpins the working group’s report. This risks perpetuating the lack of trust that is already keenly felt by the staff these new procedures are supposed to protect and risks further reputational damage for Parliament by opening us up, quite rightly, to accusations that we are dragging our feet or letting perpetrators off the hook.

We may have made huge strides in the past 100 years, but we still have a patriarchal political culture that denigrates, bullies and discriminates against women. A complaints mechanism that is fit for purpose will not radically transform things overnight, but it will make a big difference, and it will send a loud signal that we recognise the problem. That difference and that signal will, however, be fatally undermined if the independence test falls at the last hurdle and MPs are left deciding on recall and other sanctions.

I want to say a few last words about culture change. I have been heartened by the number of Members on both sides of the House who have stressed its importance. It was not formally within the remit of the working group, but I am glad that we stayed into it, because that was the right thing to do. That shows that we have an opportunity to start to dismantle the power inequalities that exercise such a damaging grip on politics and to replace them with a culture founded on dignity, equality and safety from harassment—a culture that underpins, rather than merely sanctioning those who have not yet grasped why grabbing someone’s knee without permission is a problem but that also seeks to educate.
found ways within that framework to pay attention to cases where the complainant chooses to remain anonymous.

The working group report does not go as far as I would like in some areas, but I am proud of the extent to which we have signalled a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct. Making politics a world that is genuinely attractive, accessible and safe for all, irrespective of gender, race, sexuality or background, is a prize from which society as a whole can only benefit. I am reassured by the response that we have heard from both sides of the House today that this is something that we can do and that we can make a real difference.

4.58 pm

Andrea Leadsom: Today marks a positive step forward towards achieving a working environment that treats everyone with the dignity and respect they deserve when they come to work. Further work is needed, but I want to take this opportunity to thank all those who have helped us to get to this point. First, I want to thank all the members of the working group: the hon. Members for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), for Belfast South (Emma Pengelly) and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts); my noble Friend Baroness Evans of Bowes Park and Lord Hope of Craighead; and our staff representatives, Max Freedman, Georgina Kester and Emily Cunningham. I thank them for all their commitment, dedication and perseverance over the past few months.

I should also like to thank the amazingly hard-working members of the secretariat: Nick Beech, Andrew Burrow, Christopher Clarke, Ian Hook, Justine How, Alix Langley, Helen Mott, Anna Murphy, Sophie Somervail and Kate Emms, as well as my own Leader’s Office team. Their help, support and advice have been invaluable, and I sincerely thank them for their drive and determination.

I am grateful to all those who gave written or oral evidence to the group and to colleagues on both sides of the House and in the other place who have given their own thoughts and advice.

This Parliament must lead by example. It is a right, not a privilege, to be treated with dignity and respect at work. This place must set the best example of a workplace that protects and supports all those working in it, so I assure all those who have contributed and who care deeply, as I do, about changing the future for all who work here that I am 100% committed to seeing this through—no rowing back, no watering down and no delay. I hope that the House will support the motion.

Amendment agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House endorses the recommendations of the Working Group on an Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy; and asks the House of Commons Commission to authorise House officials, reporting regularly to a steering group of Members and others in consultation with the Committee on Standards and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, to undertake the work necessary to establish:

(1) a Behaviour Code for Parliament that covers bullying and harassment, and sexual harassment, and applies to all persons working for or with Parliament, or who are lawfully on the parliamentary estate;

(2) an independent complaints and grievance scheme to underpin the Code, together with associated policies, appropriate sanctions and the contractual arrangements necessary for delivering the scheme;

(3) particular procedures to deal with reports of sexual harassment, including the provision of a specialist Independent Sexual Violence Advocate;

(4) a system of training to support the Code;

(5) a human resources support service for staff employed by Members of Parliament or jointly by political parties, delivered by a third-party provider, and a handbook for these staff;

and to identify any amendments that may be necessary to Standing Orders and the Code of Conduct, for the approval of the House.
Middle Level Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in Committee

New Clause 1

MINIMUM DEPTH REQUIREMENT

“The Commissioners must ensure that the water in the waterways is maintained to a minimum depth of three feet across two thirds of the width of any defined navigable waterway. In the event that the said depth of water is not maintained no boater shall be required to pay any charge.”—[Sir Christopher Chope.]

Brought up, and read the First time.

5 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—Requirement to provide specified facilities at Stanground Lock and Salters Lodge Lock.

New clause 3—Requirement to provide specified facilities in March.

New clause 4—Requirement to provide specified facilities and moorings.

New clause 5—Removal of power to charge before specified facilities and moorings provided.

Amendments 1 to 26.

Sir Christopher Chope: The background to new clause 1 is the principle of quid pro quo, because the petitioners are concerned that new charges and obligations are being brought in without their getting anything in return. Before I expand on that, I should say that all the new clauses and amendments are grouped as one, so we are effectively discussing the Bill as a whole. I think that every part of the Bill is included in one or other of the amendments.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con) indicated assent.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for confirming that that is the situation. It would therefore be apposite for me to make a few introductory remarks by saying that I, the petitioners and others much appreciate how the Bill’s promoters have responded positively to many of their points that have been made. A series of good points are set out in the promoters’ statement. My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who was an assiduous member of the Committee, is present, and everybody agrees that it is a credit to the House that the Bill has been considered in such detail.

Several points were made on Second Reading, the commissioners responded to them, and some of those responses were reflected in amendments in Committee. When the petitioners had the chance to be heard—I think over three days—many of their points were also accepted. The stage that we are at now is the consideration of the amendments that were proposed as a result of those representations. There are questions over whether the amendments go far enough, whether they could be tweaked in some way and about what signals could be sent to the other place, which has yet to consider the Bill. When the Bill goes to the other place, I am sure that there will be petitions against it.

We will be able to see the extent to which the petitioners’ arguments are accepted today, because it is obviously open to the Bill’s promoters to say at any stage, “Well, I think that’s a good point. We hadn’t thought of that.” My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who is sponsoring the Bill on the promoters’ behalf, is a good listener, and I am sure that things will go well in the future. If the Bill had never been objected to, it would have gone through as it was originally, but it is now much better. However, “much better” does not mean that it is not capable of being improved further. That is the whole purpose of putting forward these new clauses and other amendments this afternoon.

Paragraph 2.3 of the statement on behalf of the promoter, the Middle Level Commissioners, in support of the Bill makes it clear that “the Commissioners currently do not receive any income from navigation of the waterways.”

With the passage of the Bill, they will receive such income. New clause 1 is designed to ensure that the quid pro quo is that if the waterway is not navigable, those charges should not apply. The petitioners believe that under case law in the case of Brett v. Beale and others, the commissioners must provide something beyond what is already provided in return for making additional charges. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay will accept that that is a reasonable proposition.

The March Cruising Club is of the opinion that if boaters can be charged to use the system for navigation, it is essential that boater facilities are maintained and that an adequate depth of water is introduced as a minimum standard. Where that does not apply, any requirement to pay charges should be waived.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): My hon. Friend will be aware that the Bill affects my constituency. Without the Middle Level Commissioners, we would not have many homes protected and many thousands of hectares of farmland would not be kept productive. Does he agree that the key point is that if navigation, locks and waterways are funded through this charge, there will be more money for flood defences, which are a key priority in this part of East Anglia? Does he agree that the principle of the Bill is fit for purpose? Now that he is involved with his various amendments, the Bill may well become better, but surely the principle is very strong.

Sir Christopher Chope: I think the principle is that if the farmers—I know my hon. Friend has a significant interest in farming—are going to benefit from land drainage schemes, and this is essentially one mega land drainage scheme, I do not see why they should not have to pay for the benefit that they get from the scheme. That is what this is all about.

I am told—I do not hold myself up as an expert on anything, but certainly not on this—that if there was no longer any land drainage, the navigation would be much wider, more effective and deeper. In a sense, the land drainage enables the farmers to make their profits off the land and is of direct benefit to them, whereas the navigation would be there even if there was no land drainage. I do not know whether my hon. Friend accepts that that is a true analysis—perhaps he is a better student of geography than I—but that is what I am told.
Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I apologise to my hon. Friend for missing his opening oration. Can he tell me how many times this water is not maintained to this depth? Are we dealing with a solution looking for a problem or is this a genuine problem?

Sir Christopher Chope: I am not briefed to have an answer to that. All I can do is make the general comment that this has been raised by the March Cruising Club, which I imagine would not be concerned about it if it was not a problem. The March Cruising Club believes it is important to have this adequate depth of water set out to make sure the navigation is available.

That brings me on to new clause 2, which would require the provision of specified facilities at Stanground Lock and Salters Lode Lock. It states:

“The commissioners must, within twelve months of the day on which this Act comes into force, provide facilities at Stanground Lock and Salters Lode Lock including a lavatory, a fresh water point, bins for the disposal of refuse”

and so on. It also states that they should provide

“a minimum of ten moorings, each available for up to seven days at any one time and capable of accommodating a boat of up to fifty feet in length.”

Again this is a quid pro quo: if the commissioners want to make money out of the navigation and the vessels using it, it would be sensible for them to make sure there are proper facilities for those vessels, which will be paying significantly for the privilege of using the navigation.

A similar point is raised in new clause 3 by the March Cruising Club. This clause states:

“The Commissioners must, within twelve months of the day on which this Act comes into force, provide facilities within the town of March including a lavatory, a coin operated water shower”

and so on. I understand that the commissioners have more or less guaranteed that that is what they are going to do, but the petitioners understandably want to ensure that those undertakings and expressions of good intention are properly reflected in the legislation, rather than just being left as a matter of good will.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Surely there are few precedents for putting in the Bill specific infrastructure service provisions such as these. Doing so would cheapen the Bill in some ways and would make the point publicly that there was not this confidence between the Middle Level Commissioners and the different boating interests. What those boating interests want above all else is good navigable waters that are well maintained and at the right depth and with locks that work so that they can enjoy their boats at different times. If there is a surplus of revenue, and the relationship between the commissioners and the boating interests is positive and proactive, these other facilities can be looked at in the future. I urge my hon. Friend to consider that putting this in the Bill is not a good idea.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am glad my hon. Friend agrees that the provision of these facilities is a good idea, but I cannot understand why he thinks requiring them to be provided in the Bill is not a good idea.

Sir Henry Bellingham: There is no need.

Sir Christopher Chope: Ultimately, it is an issue of trust as to whether or not the undertakings given will be honoured. We have precedents from other private Bills in this House—for example, the north London cemetery Bill—where the promoters have written to the Chairman of Ways and Means giving an undertaking, which was then put in the public domain. That may be another way of resolving this problem. From what my hon. Friend is saying, it seems that everyone is agreed that these facilities are necessary and desirable, and should be provided.

New clause 4 says that the

“Commissioners must within twelve months of the day on which this Act comes into force enable access to the facilities and moorings specified under this Act to be by a boater key system paid for by boaters for a nominal fee and operated by the Commissioners.”

That is not an unreasonable suggestion. It is a commonplace practice in the boating industry.

5.15 pm

The most important new clause is new clause 5, which would make provision such that no boater “shall be required to pay any charges under the provisions of this Act until the facilities and moorings specified in the Act are maintained in good repair and working order.”

The question is whether users should be required to pay before they have the facilities, or only once they are in place. That is important.

Philip Davies: I particularly support new clause 5 and struggle to find a reason why anyone could not, because it seems to be only fair and proper. Has my hon. Friend had any discussions with the Bill’s sponsor or the people behind it to find out whether they think it is a common-sense clause that they would accept or, if not, what logical reason they have for not accepting it?

Sir Christopher Chope: We have not yet reached that stage. That might be my fault, because I have not sat down with the Bill’s promoters to discuss these issues in detail. I understand that there was quite a lot of discussion of such issues in Committee. For the reasons that I have set out, the petitioners are still unhappy and feel that there should be a new clause to incorporate this provision.

Kevin Foster: I am finding my hon. Friend’s speech of some interest. He might be interested to know that clause 4 was amended in Committee to make it clear that revenue from navigation would be spent only for navigation purposes. That was done specifically in response to the petitioners’ concerns, to ensure that they could be confident that, although they are currently getting something for nothing, they will get something for what they pay—the navigation fees will go on navigation facilities and costs.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. We will come to clause 4 and the amendments to it later. I shall say nothing other than that the petitioners and I were pleased that clause 4
was introduced in Committee in response to the concerns that were expressed. As I mentioned at the outset, just because it was introduced at that stage, that does not mean that it is perfect, which is why we are dealing with these new clauses and the amendments to clause 4, to which I shall come in due course and in order, because it is much easier for people to follow proceedings if people start at the beginning and go through clause by clause.

**Philip Davies:** Does my hon. Friend agree that if new clause 5 is not accepted, that would effectively mean that people think it would be fine for the charges to be made but the facilities not to be in good repair and working order? That would clearly be intolerable—

**Sir Christopher Chope:** I hear my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Torbay, who speaks on behalf of the promoters, saying from a sedentary position that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is wrong about that. Let us wait until we discuss clause 4, which was introduced in Committee, to see whether we can tease out a little more information on all the implications.

Amendment 1 basically says that the time given between the Bill obtaining Royal Assent and being implemented is unreasonably short. The period is currently specified as only 28 days; it seems to me that it would be reasonable for it to come into force six months after the day on which it was passed. I would not say that it is the most important of the amendments, but it would be interesting to hear why the promoters do not think that that is a reasonable position to have. We know that, under the provisions of this Bill, some byelaws will have to be drawn up. That does not mean that work on the byelaws cannot start in advance of the Bill being passed into law—a period of six months will then need to be left for the Bill to be implemented—bearing in mind the fact that we are dealing with a lot of lay people who will probably need quite a lot of notice of the changes that will have to be made under the provisions of this Bill.

Amendment 2 is, in a sense, a drafting amendment. As we get a definition of “polluting matter” under clause 2, it seems much easier to keep it as an objective test. I have no quarrel with defining polluting matter as “sewage or any other injurious matter, whether solid or liquid”.

We will not let our imaginations run riot on that. What I find more difficult is what is meant by the word “offensive”. What is added by including that word? Essentially, what is offensive to one person may not be offensive to another, and it is a subjective test. I would be interested to know from my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay what that subjective test adds in that particular part of the clause on polluting matter.

Let me turn to amendment 3. I am going through these amendments quite quickly, because there is no need to spend a lot of time on amendments to which there should be a short and succinct answer, saying, “Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend, these are good amendments and we will be happy to incorporate them in the Bill.”

Amendment 3 is more of a probing amendment. We are in the new age of electricity, and the definition of power-driven vessel here includes “any vessel propelled by a detachable outboard engine” but it does not include a sailing boat, a rowing boat or a canoe—fine. However, now that we have a new generation of electric motors, why do we not introduce in a Bill such as this an incentive for people to use electric power on these waterways? Obviously, electric power is much less polluting and better for the atmosphere. If it is as quiet as many of these new cars seem to be, it will hardly disturb anybody, as the boat, powered by an electric motor, glides down the route of the navigation. I am interested in hearing the thoughts of my hon. Friend on that.

Indeed, in recognising the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on the Front Bench, who has come along to help us in our deliberations, I could perhaps say that this is an issue for the Government. Perhaps the Government might be interested in thinking about introducing some sort of incentive for the use of electric motors rather than outboards. I know that a lot of my constituents would be very happy if there were more electric-driven vessels rather than power-driven vessels. This could open up a much larger issue, but why not start raising it now on the first occasion today?

That takes me on to amendment 4, which is about the “use”. Are we talking about the use of vessels? The Bill says:

“‘use’ in relation to any vessel on a waterway, includes launching the vessel onto the waterway, keeping or mooring it on the waterway”.

I have no quarrel with the rest of it, which is “navigating it on the waterway, and letting it for hire on the waterway”.

There seems to be a lot of concern about what happens when people have a vessel that is kept at the side of the waterway or even in a marina, or is used as a houseboat. Are we really saying that that amounts to using the vessel on a waterway? Under this definition, it would amount to using the vessel on a waterway and that does not really seem to be common sense. Surely using a vessel on the waterway means actually using it—navigating it and letting it for hire on the waterway—but it does not include keeping or mooring it on the waterway.

Amendment 5 is a more extensive version of a similar concern that has been raised by a number of the petitioners. They say that the amended definition of waterways, compared with the definition before the Bill was in Committee, is a “move in the right direction”, but that “it still serves to extend the jurisdiction and control of the Commissioners into privately owned property (such as marinas), which will usurp the rights of property owners to decide who and which boats can use the water over their land.”

The petitioners feel that this is an “unwarranted interference with the rights of private citizens”, and that, at the very least, there should be a provision for boat owners whose vessels remain permanently in the marina to make an off-the-water declaration—a sort of waterways statutory off road notification—so that they are no longer liable for the charges. In fact, that is a very good analogy. If individuals do not use their motor vehicle on the road, they do not have to pay road tax, so if people are not using their houseboat on the water, why should they have to pay these charges?
That issue could be resolved by having a narrower definition of waterway, which is what amendment 5 would do.

Lines 11 to 18 of clause 2 say that

“the waterways mean the waterways in respect of which the Commissioners are the navigation authority...including the waterways set out in...Schedule 1”—

what we would all understand as the waterways—

“water control structures...or...the banks of, those waterways; and...any watercourse in the Middle Level”,

which is obviously what this Bill is about. However, I do not see why that should include a lake, pit, pond, marina or substantially enclosed water adjacent to those waterways and from which any vessel may be navigated, whether through a lock or into the waterways themselves. If a vessel is navigated into the waterway, it is in the waterway and is liable under the provisions of this Bill. But if it is not navigated in there, it does not seem relevant to say that it could be navigated. One way of reducing the scope of the definition of “waterway”, about which the petitioners remain concerned, would be to support amendment 5.

I turn to amendment 6 to clause 3—a clause that was introduced as a result of the work done in Committee. The clause establishes a navigation advisory committee, and the petitioners are very pleased about that, but they also think that it needs further definition. That is not a criticism of the people who tabled the amendment. However, given the way that we deal with legislation in our two Houses, sometimes an amendment can be improved when further considered.

5.30 pm

The petitioners are concerned that the duty on the commissioners, although it is a good idea, gives the commissioners too much discretion over, for example, the constitution of the proposed navigation advisory committee. They think that that element needs further consideration and clarification, both as to the criteria of the committee. They think that that element needs further consideration and clarification, both as to the criteria of

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for the points that he is making. However, does he agree that the slight danger with this amendment is that it would say that the persons are representative of all the interests, when the whole point of a representative committee would be to have people who represent different interests, just as we in this House all represent different constituencies even though we have the same duty as Members?

Sir Christopher Chope: My hon. Friend makes a brilliant point, but it is nothing to do with this. It is not a question of what the persons are representative of, because that is spelled out, but a question of whether they are representative of the groups listed or appear to the commissioners to be representative of them. It should be quite easy to establish whether somebody is representative of these interests rather than appearing to the commissioners to be representative of them.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I had intended to make this point of order when the hon. Gentleman stopped speaking, but I feel that he might be in the middle of a “Stackhouse filibuster”. Earlier today, Toys”R”Us announced that the company has gone into administration. That has ramifications for the store in Parkhead in my constituency. I have spent the majority of today trying to get in touch with the administrators of Toys”R”Us, with no success. Have you been given advance notice of any ministerial statement tomorrow? How can Members of Parliament do their job if they cannot get in touch with the company to seek security for the staff who work for it?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Normally I would not take a point of order at this stage, but as Sir Christopher has only just cleared his throat in making his speech, I recognise that it would be frustrating for the hon. Gentleman not to get in. The matter is on the record now. I have been given no notice of a ministerial statement about the serious issue at Toys”R”Us. I do recognise that you are representing your constituents. I hope that the message has gone out loud and clear that Toys”R”Us should be linking up with the Member of Parliament to ensure that you can represent the rights of the workers there.

Sir Christopher Chope: Unfortunately my children and I are so old that they do not benefit from visits to Toys”R”Us, but it is very sad when any long-established business goes into administration.

Philip Davies: With regard to whether people are representative or appear to be so to the commissioners, perhaps the commissioners might fear that there could be some kind of legal action on the basis of whether and how someone could be determined to be representative—that somebody might say, “Well, I don’t think these people are representative of X, Y and Z”—and so a qualification was put in to help to get them out of a potentially sticky situation. Does my hon. Friend think that that is why the amendment was worded as it was?

Sir Christopher Chope: If I may say so, that is a more plausible explanation than the one being put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay, but I think we have said enough about that. We will hear what he thinks when he responds to the debate.

I turn to amendments 6, 7 and 8 to clause 3. The petitioners are concerned that the requirement that the commissioners must take the committee’s views into
consideration has limited use, because the commissioners could say that they have taken those views into consideration but found them to be of no value. The only remedy for any such failure to take the committee’s views properly into account would then be judicial review, which is strictly time-limited, expensive and hugely unreliable, with historical bias, they think, in favour of authorities. I do not know about that, but certainly they are right in saying that judicial review is a long-winded and potentially expensive way of seeking redress.

In the light of those concerns, I have tabled amendment 7 to clause 3(6), which would mean that instead of the commissioners being required to “take into consideration” any matter, they must “give full” consideration. There is a difference between taking into consideration and giving consideration. If the commissioners gave full consideration to any matter, that would be useful.

To reinforce that point, amendment 8 would add a sentence to the end of subsection (6), which would then say that the commissioners give full consideration to any matter, recommendation or representation which may from time to time be referred or made to them by the committee “and in the event of not accepting such a recommendation or representation give full reasons for that decision.”

That would provide the sort of protection that the petitioners seek and would strengthen clause 3 and make it an even more effective addition to the Bill.

Amendment 9 to clause 4 would leave out subsection (2). It is in essence a probing amendment, to draw attention to the whole issue of charges and constraints upon the way in which charges can be made, which, as has been said, is a useful amendment to the Bill. I am suggesting that it could be linked more specifically with each of the different uses for which charges will be recoverable.

Amendment 10 would mean that in exercising the power under clause 4(1)(a), rather than the whole of subsection (1), “the Commissioners must aim to secure that, taking one financial year with another, the income from charges under that subsection does not exceed the annualised costs incurred by the Commissioners in exercising their functions in respect of navigation under the navigation Acts.”

It seems that that relates to the use of any waterway by any vessel. Those would be the charges for the use of the waterway, and they would link in directly with the functions in respect of navigation under the navigation Acts.

I am much more dubious about linking in the reasonable charges for the provision of services and facilities in respect of the waterways and their banks, because they are not separated out from the more general, nor is the requirement for registration of any vessel under navigation byelaws. Those charges should be separately identified and accounted for, and they should undergo this test: taking one financial year with another, the charges under those subsections should not exceed the annualised costs. This is a refinement of clause 4, and I think that it would improve the clause significantly.

Amendment 11 also deals with the annualised issue. The effect of amendment 12 would be as follows:

“The Commissioners may revise, waive or remove any charge fixed under subsection (1)(a), and different charges may be fixed for different cases or classes of case.”

The amendment would extend the commissioners’ discretion, while making sure that it was specific to the different categories of activity for which they can recover charges.

Amendment 13, which is a probing amendment, would leave out subsection (4). I hope that we will hear further explanation of why the commissioners want to “make the use of the services and facilities referred in subsection (1)(b) subject to such terms and conditions as the Commissioners may specify in writing.”

The most radical amendment that I have tabled to clause 4 is amendment 14, which I hope will find favour with Members from across the House. The amendment would add, at the end of the clause:

“No charge shall be payable in respect of the use of a waterway by a vessel being used by a person who is registered disabled”.

I raise that because there is quite an issue about disability, the use of waterways and the use of powers similar to those sought by the promoters of the Bill. Such powers have been abused on occasions, and disabled people have been severely pilloried and discriminated against. Why should it not be possible to exempt disabled people from these charges?

I have been sent a press cutting dated April 2015 from Wiltshire, where a disabled boat owner who lived on the Kennet and Avon canal faced costs of up to £76,000 as a result of action that was taken against him by the Canal and River Trust. The individual was living on incapacity benefit and disability living allowance. Instead of allowing him to repair his boat over a period of time, the trust strictly imposed the conditions of his licence and required him to vacate his boat, which was also his home. Insult was added to injury by the fact that he was denied legal aid, and he was instead represented by the legal officer of the National Bargee Travellers Association.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Sir Christopher, I am just waiting to see how this links in with the Bill.

Sir Christopher Chope: It links in with my amendment 14, Mr Deputy Speaker, because amendment 14 would exempt—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am more bothered that this is about the Avon canal and that particular individual, who is not actually on the Middle Level or affected by it. I understand you making a reference, but not in detail.

5.45 pm

Sir Christopher Chope: I accept that we do not want to go into any more detail than I have already, but the analogy is that the powers that are being sought in the Bill by the Middle Level Commissioners are almost identical to the powers that have already been obtained by other organisations, such as the Canal and River Trust, which operates on the Kennet and Avon canal.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Is there any serious demand from disabled people in the boat-owning community in East Anglia for this exemption? I have a number of disabled constituents who are boat owners, and as I pointed out on Second Reading in the last Parliament, many boat owners from my constituency will motor
upstream into the different parts of the Middle Level. I have not come across any demand from disabled people; this is not like the blue badge scheme. We have great respect for those in the disabled community, but is my hon. Friend really saying that there is a desire to give them an exemption from these charges? Would that not just make the scheme that much more bureaucratic? Also, most disabled people are very proud, so do they really want this exemption?

Sir Christopher Chope: Obviously, they would get the exemption only if they applied for it. Disabled people are proud, and I have a lot of disabled residents among my constituents, but that does not mean that, for example, they do not cherish the ability to park their cars using a discretionary parking permit.

In direct answer to my hon. Friend’s intervention, I had not received any representations from disabled constituents of his before making this speech; if I had, I would have referred them to him. However, what I can say is that the Canal and River Trust, which was dealing with this issue in Wiltshire, has now accepted in principle that disabled boaters should not have enforcement action taken against them in the same way as able-bodied boaters, but it has not yet been very keen to communicate that policy to disabled people there.

All I can say is that, given how the powers have been used on inland waterways in other parts of the country, there is potentially an issue, and by putting forward amendment 14, I have at least ensured that it is discussed. As we know, there is even more interest in the other place in promoting the cause of disabled people than there is in this House. It may well be that, when the Bill gets to the other place, Members there will wish to pursue the content of amendment 14 if it is not accepted by the sponsor today.

Amendments 15 and 16 are designed to leave out clauses 5 and 7. I tabled them to enable us to have a debate on the content of those clauses, should that be thought desirable. However, having regard to the time, the best thing to do is probably not to speak to those amendments but to go on to one or two of the later amendments.

Philip Davies: That’s a shame.

Sir Christopher Chope: My hon. Friend says that that is a shame—

Sir Henry Bellingham: It is not a shame at all.

Sir Christopher Chope: Well, it is one each on that one.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very informative speech. He will recognise that other Members are affected, other than just those from the fens, because the River Nene—or “Nen”, depending on which part of my constituency someone is from—flows into the Middle Level. So this issue is wider than just a local area.

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is the Middle Level Bill!

Sir Christopher Chope: It is very important that my hon. Friend has been able to put his interest in this subject matter on the record.

Amendment 17 relates to clause 9, which addresses stranded, grounded and sunken vessels and vehicles. The amendment would remove the subsection 3, which states: “Whenever any vessel is, without lawful authority, left or moored in any waterway the Commissioners may after serving not less than 28 days’ notice on the owner of the vessel, unless it is not practicable after reasonable inquiry to ascertain the name and address of the owner, raise and remove the vessel.”

As set out in the rest of clause 9, it is perfectly reasonable for a vessel that is stranded or abandoned in a waterway and is interfering with navigation to be removed quickly. However, when one takes into account the very wide definition of “waterway”, the inclusion of subsection 3 is potentially oppressive. It could mean that the commissioners could, for example, go into a marina and raise and remove a vessel at considerable cost after no more than 28 days’ notice. The amendment would therefore remove that power from the Bill.

Clause 11 relates to the requirements for registration and incorporates a very important amendment promoted by the March Cruising Club and others on the charges and the amount by which they could be increased in any one year. It introduces a requirement that such charges should not increase above the rate of inflation as defined by the consumer prices index. Many boaters—some may be represented by my hon. Friends here this evening—are not very well-off in financial terms and need to be able to plan their budgets ahead. When they work out the costs of having a vessel on the waterway, they need to have the certainty that the charges levied cannot be increased by more than the rate of the CPI each year. By analogy, the Government have said that council tax should not increase by more than the CPI. They have made some exceptions to that recently, but the general proposition is that they cannot be increased by more than the CPI.

Mr Bone: On that point, is my hon. Friend not concerned that the Bill does not state what the initial fee will be? It just says “a reasonable application fee”. Would he not prefer the Bill to state what that fee should be?

Sir Christopher Chope: Much as I would like to agree with my hon. Friend, there has to be some discretion, because the fees need to relate to the powers and duties that will be carried out and funded by them. One of the clauses that we looked at earlier specified that the money for the fees had to be spent on various things, particularly, for example, on navigation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Can I just help a little? In fairness to Mr Bone, he was not here, but you do not need to explain what we have already discussed and we do not need to go back over it. I know that you were not attempting to do so—come on, Sir Christopher!

Sir Christopher Chope: Okay, amendment 26 is to clause 15, line 38. The clause, on the protocol of removal of vessels, states: “The Commissioners must, in consultation with the Navigation Advisory Committee, prepare, publish and maintain a protocol on the use of powers under or by virtue of this Act to remove vessels.”

My amendment proposes to change “in consultation with” to “in conjunction with”, because it seems to me that the Navigation Advisory Committee should work
The chief executive of Middle Level Commissioners, Iain Smith, has said that about 1,500 vessels use their locks every year and that about 100 boats are “hiding” unlicensed on the waterways. He believes it is the largest stretch of water in the country that boaters do not have to pay to use. I acknowledge that the National Association of Boat Owners has expressed concerns that there should be statutory provision for a minimum level of facilities and visitor moorings in the Bill and that the Bill could be a “money gathering exercise for the Commissioners”.

As outlined by the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), however, provisions in the Bill—in clause 4, if I am not mistaken—prevent the commissioners from raising more in navigation revenue than they spend on navigation. I hope that this will reassure boat owners that the Bill is not simply a matter of “money gathering” and that the appropriate safeguards are in place.

On Second Reading, the hon. Member for Torbay also noted that the Inland Waterways Association, the East Anglian Waterways Association, the Association of Nene River Clubs, the Middle Level Watermen’s Club, the Residential Boat Owners’ Association, the Association of Waterways Cruising Clubs and five local councils were in support of the Bill, and I understand that they remain in support. I have heard the detailed reservations of the hon. Member for Christchurch and the interventions of other hon. Members.

Philip Davies: Does the hon. Lady have any sympathy with any of my hon. Friend’s amendments, particularly the one about no charge “being payable in respect of the use of the waterway by a vessel being used by a person who is registered disabled”? Is that not something the Labour party would welcome?

Holly Lynch: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, which is a valid one, and of course we want to improve accessibility so that everyone can enjoy our waterways. It is certainly something we would consider further in later discussions on the Bill, but it is not something we would vote for later today.

Taking everything into account, we are satisfied that the Bill is sensible in updating the legal framework setting out the role of the Middle Level Commissioners and bringing them into line with what is now standard practice across comparable waterways. Despite its unusual journey through Westminster, we have no problem supporting it this afternoon.

Kevin Foster: It is a pleasure to get another opportunity to speak on the Bill. Given that it has already had its Second Reading, I will focus my remarks on today’s amendments and the changes made in Committee.

As the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) just mentioned, a number of positive changes were made to the Bill in response to the petitioners’ concerns, and I was grateful to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) say that changes had been made and that people had listened. It is appropriate, however, that I say briefly why I do not think it would be appropriate for the amendments and new clauses to be accepted.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I am pleased to respond on the Opposition’s behalf to this opposed private business. Although it might not be the most conventional way to introduce legislative change, and I have heard the detailed reservations of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), we are none the less satisfied that the Bill makes sense, and our intention is to support the Bill as it stands. Although the Bill is fairly narrow in scope, we acknowledge that it has important consequences for those who will be affected. We are satisfied that due scrutiny has taken place in Committee and is taking place at consideration stage this afternoon.

The Middle Level of the fens was first drained in the 17th century to reclaim an area of farmland in Cambridgeshire and west Norfolk. The Middle Level Commissioners are the navigation authority for the waterways, established through a series of local Acts passed between 1663 and 1874, so we appreciate that the legislative framework underpinning the role of the commissioners is in need of an update. This is not least because almost all the fenland within the Middle Level waterways is below sea level, and if it was not for a complex system of flood mitigation and drainage schemes managed by the commissioners, the waterways could pose a significant risk to the estimated 100,000 people who live and work in the area.

In the simplest terms, the Bill will introduce a registration scheme for vessels in the Middle Level and allow the commissioners to bring in revenue from boat owners that will be used to improve the waterways. The Environment Agency, the Canal and River Trust and the Broads Authority all have similar powers in respect of their own navigations, so in many ways, the Bill is long overdue in bringing the Middle Level into line with its neighbours. Additional income for the commissioners could make a real difference to the fenlands and waterways, and although I appreciate the desire of local boat users for improved facilities on the waterways, as we have heard, the Bill will allow the commissioners to raise revenue to deliver this.
New clause 1 would set a minimum navigation depth actually lower than the one in current legislation. New clauses 2 to 5 refer to specific facilities that could be provided. As suggested in an intervention, it therefore seems logical to specify in statute things such as coin-operated water showers. Were that to sit in primary legislation, it would run the danger of the Bill becoming completely outdated. It also makes sense for users, via the mechanisms proposed in the Bill, to be able to discuss what are appropriate facilities. The inclusion of some of these items might also render particular powers ineffective where planning permission is refused. I therefore urge the House to reject all the new clauses.

Philip Davies: I take my hon. Friend’s point about the specific items, but new clause 5 does not mention anything specific; it just maintains that something should be in “good repair and working order”. If that new clause is not accepted, what would the appropriate remedy be for boaters to ensure they did not pay for something they cannot use?

Kevin Foster: Clause 4, as amended, means that incomes can only be used for navigation purposes. Ultimately, this becomes a chicken-and-egg situation: money will have to be raised if the commissioners are to provide the type of facilities people want on the Middle Level in consultation with navigation users. The alternative is to ask those who are paying for drainage to pay for those facilities to be provided initially via their council tax bills, which seems neither fair nor equitable. That cannot be a money-raising exercise. The purpose of any moneys raised by navigation must be absolutely clear. People are already paying for drainage via council tax and a levy.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Would the historical public right of navigation and extending the powers to privately owned waters and marinas give the Middle Level Commissioners complete control and enable them to charge boats licence fees?

Kevin Foster: An amendment was made in Committee making it clear that the powers would not be extended to someone who owns the waterways and the frontage of a property. The promoters have confirmed that the owners of the marinas wish to be included in the powers of the commission. There is no specific definition. We are not talking about a lock or a quay; we are talking about an open waterway. The aim is to manage it as a whole system, with registration applying throughout, and without different safety standards or insurance requirements. That should benefit the hon. Lady’s constituents.

Amendment 1 would extend the time between the passing of the Act and the date on which it would come into effect. A 12-month transition period applies to many of the provisions relating to construction and use, but it does not make sense to delay all the provisions—such as the commissioners’ new duty to have regard to the interests of boat dwellers—to that extent.

Let me now deal with amendment 2. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch asked where the words “any other offensive” had come from. The wording is actually similar to the requirements under the Environment Agency’s powers to control discharges into water for works purposes under section 163 of the Water Resources Act 1991. It is a well-established definition, and I hope that that will reassure my hon. Friend. My hon. Friend said that amendment 3 was a probing amendment. Adding a reference to electric vehicles to a provision that also includes vehicles under sail does not take into account the direction in which technology could well move. Electric motors are becoming much more powerful, certainly far more powerful than a sail vessel. However, as I have said, my hon. Friend did say that this was a probing amendment.

The promoters would find amendment 4 unacceptable, because it would potentially remove the need for a static vessel to meet construction and safety standards or insurance requirements. I think that, given the issues that we have been debating over the past year, few of us would consider it sensible for those requirements not to apply to houseboats.

Amendment 5 would extend the commissioners’ powers in quite an odd way, and could require them to dig out virtually every watercourse in the area that is not a navigable course. It suggests the idea of a sort of waterway statutory off-road notice. This has already been taken care of by a change that was made in relation to boats that people own that are on their own property and used only by them. Parking a boat in a marina, for example, would be the equivalent of parking it in a public car park.

I made a point about amendment 6 in an earlier intervention. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), replacing the words “appear to the commissioners to be (taken together)” with the word “are” could allow a challenge over who had been appointed if someone felt that an appointee did not represent them. I do not feel that that would be an appropriate or helpful addition to the Bill. Such a challenge to the advisory committee could potentially frustrate its establishment.

I oppose amendments 9, 16 and 22 because the point of introducing a practical power is to provide for a simple registration plate that can be enforced. Getting into an argument about whether a boat has been used or not seems neither sensible nor appropriate, particularly if we are talking about looking to have basic construction and safety standards and insurance standards. In exactly the same way as if we park a car on a public road, it does not matter whether we are driving it or not as it still needs to be roadworthy and have paid vehicle tax. There are therefore similar precedents in other areas of legislation, so again I suggest that these amendments are both unwelcome and unnecessary.

As for amendments 10 and 11, the Bill makes it clear how the income from navigation will be used to fund benefits for navigation so, again, neither of them is necessary. On amendments 12 and 13, it does not seem unreasonable to allow commissioners to set conditions on the use of facilities such as, for example, cleaning showers and not abusing waste facilities. Indeed, it could undermine the purposes of providing those facilities if they were not able to provide a basic regulation system for how they were used, which is common in many other environments.

On amendment 14, I appreciate the passion of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch for ensuring that disabled people have a strong voice in this Chamber, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, who is a passionate advocate of equalities, hence his membership of the Women and Equalities Committee.
However, this amendment is flawed as it refers to a register of disabled persons when that register was abolished by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, so again I suggest it would not be sensible to bring that in.

**Philip Davies:** I appreciate my hon. Friend’s ability to find a technical reason why he should not accept the amendment, but does he accept the principle behind it?

**Kevin Foster:** We are on Report, whose purpose is to look at the technical detail of the Bill and satisfy ourselves it would be appropriate. In terms of whether I support the principle, my council does not offer a parking fee concession for those who hold a blue badge, only the ability to use reserved spaces that are very close. Again, that principle is established in many areas, so I do not think the principle of this is one to take forward. This is not about someone needing an extra facility because they are disabled; this is about a boat and navigation and whether people pay the same charge as everyone else and are effectively treated exactly the same.

On amendments 15 and 16, it does not make any sense to remove the ability to promote reciprocal arrangements, and it could end up costing boat owners more if they have to have separate licences and registration and different standards, so I urge the House to reject these amendments. On amendments 17, 18, 19 and 20, a protocol will be put in place, so I do not accept the suggestion that the existing powers would be oppressive. A houseboat would only be removed in the last resort and where it was proportionate to do so.

On amendment 23, it makes little sense to apply this cap only to the application fee; it does not apply it to the registration fee. This could produce perverse effects in the long run, and I again suggest it should be rejected.

My view and that of the promoters is that amendment 26 this would cause confusion: if things are done in “conjunction” with, rather than through “consultation”, and someone wishes to take legal action, whom do they take it against? They could end up taking it against members of the navigation advisory committee which actually just got involved to represent people, so this could act as a deterrent for anyone wanting to be involved.

There are many good reasons for this Bill to be passed. It has been examined in great depth in the Opposed Bill Committee and on the Floor of the House. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch opposed Bill Committee and on the Floor of the House. It has been examined in great depth in the Committee. They seem to have done a great deal of clever and thoughtful work. I know very little about the Gloucester and Sharpness canal, where we had similar issues relating to the need to update and to who should be able to moor and therefore be charged for facilities. That was resolved, although not without difficulty, because there was some opposition. Eventually, however, people saw sense on issues such as shutting the canal on certain days when there is limited need to use it, to allow people easier passage over its many bridges. It is right and proper that such arrangements should be revisited from time to time, to ensure that our canal system and the waterway system in general are fit for purpose. I should like to add my congratulations on the work that has been done, and I hope that the Bill will pass without amendment.

**Julian Knight:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments about the conduct of the Committee, for his kind comments about the conduct of the Committee, and about its work. I believe that the Bill strikes the right balance between the clear need to upgrade the levels and the legitimate concerns of those who use them, and as a result I am happy to recommend the new Middle Level Bill to the House.

**Fiona Onasanya:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I know that she has a local concern.

**Julian Knight:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments about the conduct of the Committee, and about its work. I believe that the Bill strikes the right balance between the clear need to upgrade the levels and the legitimate concerns of those who use them, and as a result I am happy to recommend the new Middle Level Bill to the House.

**Fiona Onasanya:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I know that she has a local concern.

**Julian Knight:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I know that she has a local concern.

**Fiona Onasanya:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Can he assure me that low-wage families living on boats will not suffer homelessness as an unintended consequence of the legislation? Can he also confirm that the revenue acquired from the licence fee will be spent on boaters and their facilities?

**Julian Knight:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I know that she has a local concern.

As I have said, I believe that the Bill strikes the right balance. Today’s debate is, rightly, restricted to the technicalities of the Bill, as the case for updating the law governing the Middle Level navigations is undeniable and has been accepted by the House. The existing Acts were laid down in the 19th century and simply do not reflect the realities of managing a modern waterway. The Bill will bring the Middle Level into line with the rules governing neighbouring systems, prevent the diversion of resources away from vital flood prevention measures, and allow the commissioners to provide the standards of safety and convenience that should be standard on all British waterways.

I know that some object to the Bill on the ground that to charge those who navigate the levels breaches an ancient right of free navigation. However, after close scrutiny, my colleagues and I do not believe that that is the case. For starters, there has always been a levy for using the Middle Level. When the previous Middle
Level Acts were drafted, the waterways were heavily used by commercial and industrial shipping, with pleasure craft almost an anomaly in that respect. It was therefore sensible to concentrate fees for maintaining the navigations on commercial shipping.

However, the situation today is entirely the reverse: the levels are well used by pleasure and leisure craft, and they see little, if any, commercial traffic. It is therefore only right that we empower the commissioners to levy funds from those who enjoy the Middle Level today. We should also remember that many of the costs are incurred explicitly through keeping the waterways navigable. Locks could easily be replaced by much more cost-effective alternatives such as weirs, were flood control the commission’s only consideration. I believe that this also addresses concerns about a supposed right to free navigation. Certainly, the case can be made that the state ought not to levy a fee to sail on a naturally navigable river, but when public funds must be laid out to maintain an artificial navigation, it is just that those who benefit should pay.

I also urge the House to remember that the Middle Level navigations are not only navigable waterways but important flood protection measures, without which much of the fens would be under water for at least part of the year. The Middle Level commissioners are responsible for both those important functions, but without the ability to levy funds from those using the waterways, they have no choice but to maintain them by diverting money from their flood defences. As a matter of public safety, as well as one of basic fairness, this should change.

In Committee, we heard another important objection to the proposed fees system that I would like to address here: what will those who pay the fee receive in exchange? That is a perfectly reasonable concern, and I will briefly explain to the House how the Bill has addressed it. First, we have a commitment from the commissioners that they will not under any circumstances levy more money from boat users than they need to maintain the navigations in good order. In fact, I am told that they are likely to raise much less than that. The commissioners also know that they will only undermine their own fundraising efforts if they set the rates at a level that discourages the use of the waterways. I am therefore confident that the rates will remain competitive and in line with the rest of the inland waterway network, which is in effect a market.

Secondly, the commissioners have committed to spending the money raised from those using the navigations on maintaining the navigations themselves. Thirdly, the facilities on the Middle Level are clearly in urgent need of an upgrade. At present, there are only two public facilities on the entire system, and it needs not only more toilets, but other services such as drainage, watering posts, and refuse collection. All that needs to be paid for, and it does not seem right that local council tax payers are asked to fund improvements so that the actual beneficiaries can enjoy them free of charge.

Another objection heard by the Committee was that new rules would unfairly penalise houseboat dwellers. The rules in question are the commissioner’s powers to move vessels that have been abandoned or moored without authority. Some of the petitioners were concerned that the notice periods were too short. Others even alleged that the proposals violated the human rights of those who live on the level. However, I believe that the Bill has addressed such concerns. For a start, there is obviously no possibility of this or any other Bill empowering the commissioners to violate anybody’s human rights unless some explicit exemption were written into it for that purpose.

Beyond that, the Bill contains several additional measures intended to reassure residents of the Middle Level. It provides a clear definition of the “lawful authority” under which vessels can be removed and specifies that any notices must be served to the vessels in question. Clause 15 requires that the commission publish a clear protocol to specify that moving a vessel will be a last resort. Moreover, clause 13 explicitly mandates the commission to have regard for the rights and interests of boat dwellers and to report annually on how they have upheld that duty. That means that the Middle Level navigations will offer some of the best and most explicit protections to houseboat users of any part of this country’s inland waterways. I concluded that the protections are more than adequate to offset the legitimate concerns of boat users while still allowing the commission to perform the essential function of moving abandoned or illegally moored vessels that are either blocking the use of moorings by others or obstructing navigation of the narrower waterways.

Finally, on byelaws and regulation, the new powers proposed in the Bill will allow the commission to require vessels to be insured and to meet proper safety standards, while providing a period of adjustment so that those using the levels can make sure their boats are up to code. My colleagues on the Committee and I all felt that that was important not only for its own sake, but to prevent the Middle Level becoming a dumping ground for old, unsafe vessels that are no longer legal on other parts of the network. Furthermore, the Middle Level will be adopting standards similar to those of neighbouring waterways, which will mean minimal disruption for anybody trying to use the navigations as part of the broader network. In short, the Middle Level will modernise the management of the Middle Level while preserving, and indeed enhancing, its unique historical character both for today’s users and future generations.

Sir Henry Bellingham: The Bill affects my constituency along with several others, and it is vital to the people living in the fens. Without the modern drainage that was brought in during the 18th century, they would not have homes, and we would not have nearly 200,000 acres of prime agricultural land. It is also important to the owners of pleasure craft. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who chaired the Committee, and agree with what he just said, and I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevan Foster) for his indefatigable work as the Bill’s sponsor.

It is important that we have a charging regime that is simple, transparent and not too bureaucratic. Some of the amendments do make quite a lot of sense but, with great respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), I urge the House not to have anything to do with the new clauses, which would complicates the Bill and make it more bureaucratic. What we want is a simple Bill, with a charging system that really is fit for purpose. We want to build up a position of trust between the commissioners and the boat owners and users who will be paying the navigation fees.
On that basis, I very much hope that the Bill is not delayed a day longer than is necessary, because it is so important to my constituency.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Members will be pleased to know that I can be relatively brief.

The Government support the Bill, which is promoted by the Middle Level Commissioners, a statutory corporation constituted under the Middle Level Act 1862. We have had a good debate this evening and I commend the many probing amendments that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) tabled, but I believe that all the points he raised have been dealt with comprehensively, in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who has a deep grasp of all the detail of the Bill.

The legal framework that governs the commissioners’ navigation function is made up of a number of 18th and 19th century Acts, which are now considerably out of date and do not align with modern requirements or the statutory framework that is applicable to other navigation authorities. In particular, the current legal framework that governs the commissioners does not include adequate provision for the registration of vessels using the waterways or the levying of charges for the use of the waterways and associated facilities. As a result, the commissioners do not receive any income from the navigation of the waterways, which has meant that moneys raised through drainage rates and levies have had to be used to fund navigation rather than for flood defence purposes, which is contrary to Government policy.

The commissioners are therefore seeking to update and clarify their powers to enable them to properly regulate and fund their waterways. The powers that they are seeking are similar to those used by other large inland navigation authorities, for example the Canal and River Trust, the Environment Agency and the Broads Authority.

I very much support the Bill and hope that it will pass unamended this evening.

Sir Christopher Chope: We have had a good humoured and thoughtful debate, and I am grateful to everybody who has participated. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), who conceded that some of my amendments were sensible, if not the new clauses. I hope that if they are not accepted by the promoter tonight, they will be taken forward when the Bill is debated in the other place in due course, as it inevitably will be.

The issues we have discussed are of considerable concern to the petitioners. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) for having got to his feet. It is quite unusual in these debates for the person who has got down to the detail in Committee to come here to explain his reasoning and the work that he did. I thank him and the other members of the Committee once again for the work that they did and the courteous way in which they dealt with the concerns expressed by the petitioners. He has set a useful new precedent: instead of hiding their light under a bushel, the people who get involved in the Committee stage should participate on Report, as he has done.

I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for showing sympathy with some of my amendments, although she cannot bring herself to support them yet.

I will not press all the amendments in the House tonight, because it will be much better for them to be dealt with in the other place, where the ideas can be developed and the responses from the petitioners and the promoter can be made available. However, I do think that amendment 14 bears further consideration. For the benefit of those who were not here for the debate, amendment 14 is in page 6, clause 4, line 11, at the end to add

“(8) No charge shall be payable in respect of the use of a waterway by a vessel being used by a person who is registered disabled”.

I only got one response on that from my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), whom I thank for having gone through all my amendments seriatim, which is fantastic. He, like my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull, is assiduous in answering the points that have been made. It makes it much easier for someone summing up a debate if they know their points have been answered.

On the issue of disabled people, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay seized on the fact that “registered disabled” is no longer a category of persons, but this amendment would apply to people who were registered disabled with the Middle Level Commissioners. Obviously, there is a registration system for people who have these boats and it would be able to include provisions as to whether or not someone is disabled, so the technical objection that my hon. Friend raised is not a valid one. If I had used a capital “R” and a capital “D” in my amendment, perhaps it might have been. I hope people will support the amendment on the basis that a lot of people are disabled and face considerable difficulties, and it would be reasonable for all other boaters to be prepared to cross-subsidise those who register with the commissioners as being disabled.

6.30 pm

I have only one other issue to raise in conclusion. I note from what has been said that there is a move to ensure that substandard vessels will be removed. I hope that that will not be done in a way that is harassing. I chair the all-party group on park homes, so I know that there is a lot of concern that people, mostly elderly people, find themselves harassed just because their park home has not been updated for 20 years or so. There is a danger that in the drive for what I might describe as the “gentrification” of the inland waterways we may be working against the interests of the people who have been resident on those waterways for many, many years and whose vessels are not up to modern standards but are, for their purposes, perfectly good. I hope that the commissioners and the promoters will not abuse the power we are giving them.

I shall ask the House to express its opinion on amendment 14 and whether or not we would like to give disabled people who are using these inland waterways in vessels registered with the commissioners the right to do so without having to pay charges. However, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.
Clause 4

Charges

Amendment proposed: 14, page 6, line 11,
"at end add
(8) No charge shall be payable in respect of the use of a waterway by a vessel being used by a person who is registered disabled".

(Sir Christopher Chope.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the Aye Lobby.

The House having divided:

Ayes 5, Noes 177.

[6.33 pm]

Question accordingly negatived.

Third Reading

6.48 pm

Kevin Foster: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank all hon. Members who have come to support the Bill, which is a needed piece of legislation that will reform an outdated system of regulation of this waterway. I hope that all Members will support it receiving its Third Reading.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

ENERGY

That the draft Works Detrimental to Navigation (Powers and Duties of Inspectors) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 18 January, be approved.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Question agreed to.
PETITION

Nature Reserves in Dudley South

6.49 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of residents of Dudley South relating to nature reserves in Dudley South.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Dudley South,

Declares that Barrow Hill and Buckpool & Fens Pool Nature Reserves, including the Dingle and the Leys, are being blighted by the actions of motorcyclists and quadbikers who have no regard for the local environment, residents and wildlife, are causing damage to the reserve and are causing a nuisance.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with Dudley Council, West Midlands Police and other authorities, to take immediate action to safeguard our nature reserves; further that Dudley Council should create a Public Space Protection Order as set out in the Antisocial Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014; further that, by using this power and taking action against offenders, Dudley Council and West Midlands Police will be able to reduce the negative impact current behaviour has on local residents and wilder wildlife.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002116]
treatment or admitted to hospital. The following day, 27 November, Julie was found dead in her hostal room in Eilat, Israel.

Following Julie’s death, and largely because of erroneous and inaccurate claims made by the authorities in Israel, her family took the hugely brave step of releasing photographs of Julie’s badly beaten and bruised body. Those images are deeply distressing, but the family felt they had no choice, because the autopsy report, which the family believe is deeply flawed, claimed that Julie had died of natural causes. The bruising and damage to Julie’s beautiful face, in my view, tells a very different story.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Hannah Bardell: If the hon. Gentleman will let me make some more progress, I will then take interventions.

Julie is survived by her parents and her aunt Deborah, who is one of the most determined, fearless and inspiring women I have ever met. In her own words, “My family will continue to fight for justice for Julie. We’d hate for any other family to go through what we have. The FCO promised in 2014 there would be processes in place for suspicious deaths abroad yet our family had to fight every step of the way for help and advice, even after requesting freedom of information. Instead of the promised 20 day response, I had to pursue every 21 days and eventually received it after 5 months. I ask the Foreign Office when will they listen to what families need? Why did it take so long for basic information to be relayed to me? Why are families still being let down with lack of help and support?”

Just over a year later, I find myself dealing with another tragic case, that of Kirsty Maxwell. Kirsty was 27 years old, newly married to husband Adam, and was on holiday in Benidorm, Spain, with friends. On 29 April 2017, Kirsty fell to her death from a balcony on the 10th floor of a block of apartments where she had been staying. The family are still struggling to get full details, largely because the Spanish police failed to interview key witnesses and initiate major crime scene protocols and procedures.

We know that the room she fell from was not her own. However, due to the apparent flawed investigation, the reason she was in that room is not known. The room she entered was occupied by a group of English men who were high on drugs and alcohol, and the circumstances that ensued may have been fuelled by the men’s use of drugs and a case of mistaken identity by the men in the room. The Spanish police report, Spanish media reporting and some crime scene examinations indicated that Kirsty tried to escape, possibly in fear of her life.

Adam sent me a poem that he read out at Kirsty’s funeral. I will not read it here, but it gives the view of a warm, funny, loving young woman who had just been promoted at work and loved her family, her husband and her pug dog with all her heart. I have spent quite a significant amount of time with Kirsty’s husband Adam and her parents, Brian and Denise. They too are some of the bravest folk I have ever had the privilege of meeting, and they have worked tirelessly to get answers, along with the independent reviewer, David Swindle. It is impossible to put into words the depths of their devastation and sorrow, but they provided me with the following words:

“Mentally, emotionally and physically this has been extremely tough and still with no real end in sight. When Kirsty was brutally taken from us they also took a part of us all, something we will never regain. Kirsty was visiting an EU country as a British citizen, she lived by the rules set out in today’s society. She worked every day, paid her taxes and never called on the system for any assistance. Now we plead for that assistance, plead for justice to be sought, plead for her country not to desert her and her family in their hour of need. She needs this help more than ever, needs much more than lip service to be done, needs more support for Scottish and UK families who lose a loved one abroad in suspicious circumstances. Those past 10 months as a family we have felt lost, confused and abandoned. Lost at the lack of direction and compassion we were shown from authorities. Confused at the revolving door of dysfunctional protocol and procedures which are not in place, displaced and misunderstood. Abandoned by legal systems not understood, not relevant and not fit for the purpose of protecting victims of suspicious deaths and murders abroad. This and trying to grieve while fighting a case through the Spanish courts with no assistance financially, legally or morally from either the UK or Spain. We hope this cross party of MPs—a group that I hope to set up in the very near future—“can get together to produce a procedure that can offer their constituents assistance, support and a means of gaining justice for any suspicious death of a loved one abroad.”

Royston Smith: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I apologise for interrupting her when she was making such a powerful and emotional speech. It was at a point that reminded me of my constituent, Mrs Brenda White, who, tragically, lost her son Michael in Thailand. She was told that it was suicide, but she simply did not believe that, and much of the evidence did not support that. I agree with the hon. Lady that, although the Foreign Office does a great job under some very trying circumstances, she, myself and others are giving examples of where the Foreign Office has fallen short for our constituents who feel they should have had much more support when their loved ones were so tragically taken from them.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and my thoughts and prayers are with his constituents.

7 pm

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

Hannah Bardell: What can we say to those families—our constituents—other than that we need to resolve, right here and now, that we cannot and will not let any more families die?

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend, and I am grateful to them for allowing me to intervene. Since 2015, three families in my constituency—that of Caroline Hope from Clydebank, whose family had to raise funds to allow her to come home to die; that of Lisa Brown, who has been missing in Spain for two and a half years; and that of Jagtar Singh Johal, who has been in detention in India without charge for nearly four months—have had to go through a maze of bureaucracy. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time to consider a legislative framework for consular support, because of its complexity, rather than the ad hoc policy approach that we have seen for a long time? That is no detriment to the staff of the FCO, who do a commendable job.

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree; it is about having the most robust framework possible and giving officers in the foreign service the tools and the resource to do the best job they can.
Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): A young man from my constituency, Craig Mallon, was killed—murdered—in Spain in 2012. The case could be resolved if we had more information. I want to work with the hon. Lady and the Foreign Office on the Craig Mallon case, and the police have to work with us. They are withholding information, six years on. The family is distraught, and we need more information.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and I look forward to working with him. I am aware of the case of Craig Mallon, and my thoughts and prayers are with him. The experience of the families whom I have supported is that at times, communication has been disjointed and it has been difficult to interact with officers. In the case of Kirsty’s family, her husband Adam received a call from the Spanish police to say that Kirsty was dead. Adam told me that he thought initially that it was a prank call, and he asked whether the FCO should have clearer protocols for informing family members of a death.

Julie Pearson’s family learned of her death through infrequent communications. It was Julie’s aunt, Deborah, who brought the news of Julie’s death to the attention of the FCO. Deborah told me recently that the consulate denies ever having received a letter from me or correspondence from her about getting Julie’s personal belongings back. I have that letter, and I know that I sent it. More than two years on, Julie’s personal effects have just been passed to her family. It is a very basic thing, but having the personal effects of a loved one back is vital.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. On that point, I raised in this House last summer the case of Kirsty Jones, a constituent of mine. Her parents, Sue and Glyn, received a phone call from the Foreign Office to say that their daughter Kirsty had been traumatically murdered in Thailand. That was 18 years ago, and Thailand closes cases after 20 years. The family are trying to get Kirsty’s belongings back into this country. DNA testing has improved, and they are trying to get DNA tests done. The local police force now has to send another international letter of request to get Kirsty’s belongings back over here for final assessment and analysis. The process—internationally, rather than that of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—is wrong, and we have to change it.

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree. There is much more that can be done on the global stage about these issues, particularly when they cross jurisdictions and families have to deal with a legal system that is alien to them. While I appreciate that many of the issues we are raising may have been outside the power of the FCO, it is interesting to note that, in 2014, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee published its fifth report, “Support for British nationals abroad: The Consular Service”. I quote from that report:

“In cases of deaths abroad, we received substantial anecdotal evidence to indicate that FCO services to bereaved families are inconsistent and have at times fallen well below the expected standards of the FCO, with repeated failures of communication and compassion. We welcome the FCO’s ongoing review of how it provides services in cases of suspicious deaths abroad, and give our support for a proposal for a specialised central unit to provide expert and dependable assistance.”

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Friend very much for bringing this important debate forward. One of the issues that she has raised, in common with Members on both sides of the Chamber, is the series of unanswered questions that families have to experience. Does she agree that another concern is the lack of pastoral care and support for families who go abroad? Two of my constituents lost their son abroad. When they went out to the EU member country where he died, they were given no police contact and no pastoral support; they were completely abandoned in their grief and isolated in a country where they did not speak the language. This really is not good enough. People do not just need help with the legal process; they also need support in their time of grief.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Friend for that intervention, and I absolutely agree. This is often about taking a lead, but some of the language in the Foreign Office guidance is very conditional, and I will come on to that.

In Kirsty Maxwell’s case, it took me from first writing to the FCO in October 2017 to February 2018 to get a contact name, which is not the sort of compassion I find acceptable. To date, I am still unclear about the remit and power of the murder and manslaughter unit, and I also do not know why it cannot become involved when a criminal investigation is ongoing. Perhaps that is something the Minister can shed some light on.

Similarly, we have been chasing the whereabouts of the clothes that were on Kirsty’s body when she died. We found out only very recently that these key pieces of evidence have been destroyed by the Spanish authorities—a matter I believe the FCO should be raising at the highest possible level. I appreciate that, at times, these are diplomatic issues—matters that have to be raised and pushed by the Government or by a Minister—but it is vital that the flow of communication is as clear and defined as possible.

The report I referred to goes on to highlight the use of language and the fact that support is discretionary. It quotes the FCO:

“We will consider making appropriate representations to the local authorities if there are concerns that the investigation is not being carried out in line with local procedures. Where possible, if you visit the country during the early stages of the investigation and initial court hearings related to the death, our staff there may be able to meet you... Where legal systems differ significantly from the UK, or proceedings are conducted in a language you do not understand, we may help to arrange, or attend, an initial round of meetings with the authorities.”

The language is too discretionary—it is way too conditional—and it needs to be more robust and more definite.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): My hon. Friend is giving a very powerful and moving speech. I have details of what happened to constituents of mine. It was not a suspicious death, but very much a sudden death, involving an elderly constituent on holiday with his family. In that instance, the local embassy failed the family very badly. The advice they got consisted of an email with a link to a 28-page document that they were supposed to read in the hours when the lady was still trying to come to terms with the fact that she had lost a husband and the rest of the family were trying to come to terms with the fact that they had lost a father and a father-in-law.
The family were at the departure gate waiting for what would have been a very difficult flight home when they got a phone call saying that they were responsible for finding a Spanish qualified lawyer who spoke English. Later, they were told out of the blue that they had to find £2,000 to have documents translated between Spanish and English. Nobody told them at the time that when their dad was brought home, there would need to be another post mortem. Somewhere along the line, the authorities lost his passport and death certificate. I think the insurance company and the insurance broker are still arguing between themselves as to who should be funding the additional costs.

Not all of that is down to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but does my hon. Friend agree that a first step would be to make sure that one person in the specific embassy or consulate is attached to a grieving family and is responsible for sorting out whatever needs to be sorted out, so that the family do not have to argue with undertakers, lawyers and insurance companies at a time when, as in this case, all they want to do is get their dad home for a burial?

Hannah Bardell: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He raises some very pertinent and important points. I appreciate that some of them are outside the FCO’s remit, but there are wider issues in relation to insurance companies, with whom some of my constituents have struggled, and protocols, procedures and legal systems. Unfortunately, when Kirsty’s family arrived in Spain they were initially given very little support. They were given a list of English-speaking lawyers, but there was no indication of whether any of them had any expertise in homicide. That has been very challenging.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate and for the proposed all-party group on deaths abroad, on which I have said I will help. She refers to poor local police performance. That was certainly the case for Michael Porter, whose mother from Dumfries died in suspicious circumstances in March 2009 on the island of Crete. It was over a year later that the police decided it was murder. Since then, very little has happened and Michael Porter is still fighting for justice for his mother. I hope that the Minister will meet Michael Porter at some point. I also hope that the hon. Lady’s proposed all-party group and this Adjournment debate will help the many people in this dreadful situation.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and I very much look forward to working cross-party on this issue, which transcends party political boundaries. We can all work constructively to bring about change.

We want to know what more the FCO can do to assure people like Julie’s and Kirsty’s families that, where a police investigation is not being properly executed, the FCO will make representations and put pressure on the authorities to investigate properly, or invite the police from the nations of the UK to help, as was rightly done, as we all remember, in the case of Madeleine McCann. No one expects them to promise to fix it, but more attempts can be made. I feel very strongly that not enough has changed for the families I represent since the report.

We have heard of many other cases from constituents. I know that my hon. Friend for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) has a constituent, Julie Love, who has done a huge amount of work on this issue following the death of her son Colin, who died in a swimming accident in Venezuela. She successfully campaigned to have the law changed in Scotland on fatal accident inquiries.

The correspondence with the Government on both of my constituency cases has uncovered some concerning points.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. She is being incredibly generous with her time. I, too, pay tribute to the amazing work of Julie Love, and the determination with which she fought for that change in the law. Indeed, our fellow colleagues Anne McLaughlin and Bob Doris, the local MSP, helped her with that. My hon. Friend makes a point about the need for the FCO to listen carefully and to respond. The expectations people have of their own Government’s representation in foreign countries very often does not match their experiences. I have also dealt with constituents who have survived terrorist attacks. They, too, found that the service they received from the FCO did not match their expectations. I therefore wish my hon. Friend all the best with what she is taking forward.

Hannah Bardell: I thank my hon. Friend. It is a testament to the police services of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland that they do have the highest standards. I know, from talking to a very senior police officer, the level of support received by the families of foreign nationals who die in Scotland. She spoke to me about how they took the family of a loved one who had been killed in a road traffic accident to the site and how they had been given support every step of the way. Rightly, our citizens expect a high level of service because they get a high level of service across the UK.

On 11 August 2016, in response to my letter about Julie Pearson, the then Minister, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), stated: “The FCO does not translate formal documents because this type of support is best provided by independent professionals and we do not have the funding or the expertise to provide such specialist services... The FCO also does not pay legal costs so could not contribute towards any case Ms Pearson’s family may wish to initiate in Israel.”

I understand that. That is a very fair point, but it raises the question about translation services and what more can be done in that regard.

On 7 February 2017, the Prime Minister said in response to a letter: “I fully understand why you believe improvements can be made to the way in which the Government provides support to the relatives of British nationals who die abroad... The Government has a responsibility to help them through the subsequent process with clarity and compassion.”

Even the Prime Minister recognises that there are flaws and issues with the FCO’s support and processes when dealing with deaths abroad in suspicious circumstances. I wonder whether the Minister would like to take the opportunity to apologise to the families who have been let down. I and other Members and campaigners on this issue have been inundated with stories and experiences of the families of British citizens who have died in difficult and distressing circumstances abroad.
As I said at the beginning, I have the highest regard for the Minister, for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and for the consular profession and the work that they do in some of the hardest and toughest circumstances. However, it is clear to me from the experiences of Kirsty’s and Julie’s families that they deserve better, and for the families and constituents of Members across this House, we need to make sure that there is a review of support and proper action to ensure that the processes and protocols are absolutely the best that families can expect.

In memory of those who have died and to protect and prevent future distress, I plead with the Minister: let us work together to help the families who are suffering now and to change the system. We owe it to them and to the memory of those who have died to make sure that the services that are offered abroad to our citizens are the very best that they can be and that our citizens get, where possible, proper investigations into such deaths, and answers and justice.

Every year from this country, 70 million Britons travel abroad. Last year, tragically, 3,912 British citizens died overseas, and 74 of those were identified as cases of murder or manslaughter. The death of a loved one in any circumstances is distressing, but when it happens far from home, where the culture or practices are unfamiliar, and particularly when the cause of death is unclear, it can be especially traumatic. My thoughts go out to all those who have lost loved ones, and I offer my deepest condolences in particular to the families of Julie Pearson and Kirsty Maxwell, about whom the hon. Lady has spoken so movingly this evening.

Sadly, British nationals do tragically die overseas, and our global network of 772 consular staff are there to be contacted in these situations. I am glad to add my tributes to the work that they do out in the field. We heard that echoed by the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) on securing the debate, on the very sensitive way in which she put her case and those of her constituents and on the very constructive way in which she is approaching her engagement with us on this issue.

In the very constructive way in which she is approaching the case of Kirsty Maxwell, about whom the hon. Lady has spoken so movingly this evening, I want to take the Minister back briefly to her point about the police going abroad and the case of Madeleine McCann. I am sure that she will appreciate, as will others, that it seems somewhat random how much publicity a case gets or in what circumstances police are invited abroad. In the case of my constituents, the families want to know that there is equity in how cases are investigated and how negotiations are done around police being invited abroad. The police in Scotland would very much like to go to Spain to investigate the case of Kirsty Maxwell but cannot without that invitation. What can she and the Government do to initiate invitations around police being invited abroad. The police in Scotland very much like to go to Spain to investigate the case of Kirsty Maxwell but cannot without that invitation.

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Hannah Bardell: I am grateful to the Minister for her initial comments. Does she recognise that it is only fair and appropriate for the UK Government and authorities to press where processes and procedures are not being followed? In the case of my constituent Kirsty Maxwell, Spain has a victims’ bill of rights, which, as far as I can see, is not being respected. The rights of the victim and the family are not being respected. It is only appropriate to intervene and put pressure on to hold that country and its authorities to their standards—not necessarily ours, but the standards that they have in their own judicial system—and say, “Look, you need to undertake a proper investigation, in line with your own law.”

Harriett Baldwin: The family in this case have retained the services of a local lawyer. The hon. Lady asked about the case of Madeleine McCann and UK police going out to help. She will appreciate that UK police only go out following a request from the local police team. We cannot just send out a team of police officers without a local request. In our travel advice, we emphasise that we cannot interfere in local processes, and we would not want that kind of interference in our own.

We regularly review our consular policy to make sure we provide the best possible service to British nationals travelling abroad, and this sometimes leads to changes in our approach. For example, in response to recommendations from the FAC report the hon. Lady referred to, and following our own internal review, we created a dedicated murder and manslaughter team in our consular assistance department. In 2015, the team has established strong relationships with key stakeholders and partners, who can include organisations such as Victim Support as well as police family liaison officers and coroners’ officers. The team has also created new guidance for bereaved families. We now have 15 country-specific leaflets explaining the requirements and processes that families need to follow, and consular officials receive specialised training on handling deaths abroad. We continually work to ensure that our internal guidance reflects the needs of British citizens.

On average, 60 British nationals are murdered overseas every year. Since our murder and manslaughter team was established, it has provided assistance to approximately 220 families across the globe. A great deal of interest has been expressed today in two cases, which I would now like to turn to, if I may.

Hannah Bardell: I want to take the Minister back briefly to her point about the police going abroad and the case of Madeleine McCann. I am sure that she will appreciate, as will others, that it seems somewhat random how much publicity a case gets or in what circumstances police are invited abroad. In the case of my constituents, the families want to know that there is equity in how cases are investigated and how negotiations are done around police being invited abroad. The police in Scotland would very much like to go to Spain to investigate the case of Kirsty Maxwell but cannot without that invitation. What can she and the Government do to initiate invitations and make sure that police forces work together and that in more cases the police are invited abroad. The police in Scotland very much like to go to Spain to investigate the case of Kirsty Maxwell but cannot without that invitation. What can she and the Government do to initiate invitations and make sure that police forces work together and that in more cases the police are invited abroad. The police in Scotland very much like to go to Spain to investigate the case of Kirsty Maxwell but cannot without that invitation. What can she and the Government do to initiate invitations and make sure that police forces work together and that in more cases the police are invited abroad. The police in Scotland very much like to go to Spain to investigate the case of Kirsty Maxwell but cannot without that invitation.

Harriett Baldwin: It is hard to make generalised statements when talking about specific cases, but, by way of a generalised statement, I am saying that it will always require a request from the local team. We will sometimes work through Interpol and others, but, given
that the variety of cases is so broad, I can only make the generalised point that a request has to come from the local teams.

On the specific cases the hon. Lady raised, I commend Kirsty’s husband, Adam—they had been married only seven months when she died—and her for their continued efforts to find answers about the circumstances of her death. Throughout this time, consular officials in Spain and London have continued to provide support to the family. She rightly raised the phone call that Kirsty’s husband received from Spanish police, and we have gone back and made very clear the process we would prefer they followed. We have spoken to the Benidorm police to ensure that it is local police who break the news to families back here in the UK.

I understand, however, that the families still have concerns about how the Spanish authorities have handled the case, especially what steps the police took to compile the evidence they presented to the courts. I hope that they can resolve those concerns with the help of their Spanish lawyer, who is best placed to advise them on local law. As I said earlier, we cannot intervene in another country’s legal affairs. My right hon. Friend the Spanish lawyer, who is best placed to advise them on their for their continued

I stand ready to make further representations if they do not receive a satisfactory response from the authorities.

As I said earlier, the police cannot become involved in cases outside their jurisdiction unless they are invited to do so. I am pleased to hear that Kirsty’s family have received additional support from a homicide consultancy, which has helped to review her case.

Royston Smith: The Minister said that we could intervene only if we were invited to do so. What if we are never invited to do so? My constituent, whose son died in suspicious circumstances, went to the Thai police, who said that they had misled the results of the autopsy. How would the Foreign Office or our authorities involve themselves in that case? The Thai police are almost certainly never going to invite them to become involved.

Harriett Baldwin: I do not want to single out any particular countries, but as my hon. Friend will know—the hon. Member for Livingston made this point—legal processes around the world may not necessarily meet the standards to which we are used in this country.

Let me now turn, in the few minutes that are left, to the equally sad case of Julie Pearson. Following her death, consular staff provided assistance to her family and liaised with the Israeli authorities about the investigation. The authorities have now concluded their review of the case and have decided not to take further action because they could not find a sufficient connection between criminal activity and Ms Pearson’s death. I am aware that Ms Pearson’s family have expressed dissatisfaction with the Israeli authorities’ handling of the investigation, and I fully understand their deep frustration at the outcome of the review. As I said earlier, we cannot interfere in the legal processes of another country, but we will continue to work with the Israeli authorities to ensure that due processes are followed in relation to any appeal against the closure of Ms Pearson’s case.

Chris Davies: Will the Minister give way?

Harriett Baldwin: I have so little time left that I am going to use it.

The death of a loved one is devastating wherever it happens, but particularly when it happens in another country and suspicious circumstances are apparent. We know that families are often desperate to find answers. In such cases—and, indeed, whenever a British national dies overseas—the consular staff of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office support bereaved families with compassion, dedication and tenacity, often in very difficult circumstances. We will continue to take every one of these cases extremely seriously and to provide that dedicated consular assistance for those who are most in need of our help, seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

I welcome the idea of an all-party group, which I think is extremely constructive. I have my own opinions about how we can improve assistance in these cases, as did my predecessor, now the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice. First, I am sure that we would all want to ensure that resources are focused on the most vulnerable. Secondly, we must try to work with British citizens to ensure that they take responsibility and take precautions, such as obtaining adequate travel insurance, following the advice on the Foreign Office website, and not engaging in inherently risky activities. Thirdly, we must be very clear about prevention.

Hannah Bardell: My hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) has a constituent whose son was killed in a road traffic accident in Ibiza. In a bid—unfortunately—to smear his name, it was insisted that there should be an alcohol test and blood should be taken from his eyeballs in what was a very distressing case. I hear what the Minister says about British citizens abroad, but it is important that we critique such processes in-country.

Harriett Baldwin: I think that it would be very helpful for the all-party group to become involved in such issues.

Again, I congratulate the hon. Lady and all the Members who have raised constituency cases. We in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office stand ready to meet individual colleagues, and we continue to look for ways in which to improve our consular service.

Question put and agreed to.

7.30 pm

House adjourned.
1. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the equity of levels of transport spending by region.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We do not allocate transport funding on a per head of population basis; our decisions are based on a rigorous and fair appraisal process that ensures that spending goes where it is most needed and where it delivers the greatest value for money. Recent analysis by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority shows that planned central Government transport investment over the next four years is evenly balanced, with £1,039 per head of population in the north, compared with £1,029 in the south.

Paula Sherriff: May I first take this opportunity to thank all those involved in keeping our transport systems going in this inclement weather? I am sure that fellow Yorkshire MPs will have shared my surprise at the Secretary of State’s recent article in The Yorkshire Post, in which he claimed that spending in the north was somehow greater than that in the south—if, through a rather imaginative calculation, we ignore London. Does he agree that simply spinning figures will not fix our archaic northern railway systems or get northern commuters to work on time?

Chris Grayling: I echo the hon. Lady’s comments about those who are working hard to keep the transport system open today; we are very grateful to them all. In a week when the Labour party has already had issues with its use of statistics, she should look up the official statistics from the independent Infrastructure and Projects Authority, which show that planned central Government spending is higher in the north than it is in the south.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am sure that we could spend more Government money on transport in the east midlands, particularly in Northamptonshire, and especially in Kettering. The new franchise for the midland main line is currently being negotiated. Will the Secretary of State ensure that Kettering’s rail services are better after the franchise is awarded than they are now?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend, who is a strong champion of Kettering, will be delighted to know that the expansion in capacity to Corby means that there will be a much better commuter service in the mornings and evenings through Corby down to Kettering, and to Wellingborough and beyond. That is one of the benefits of the biggest investment in the midland main line since the 1870s.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Just to give the Secretary of State an example of unequal treatment, is it true that for the new east midlands rail franchise in 2020 the current HST—high-speed trains—carriages will be scrapped, because they are disability non-compliant, and the power cars will then be matched with second-hand, cast-off carriages from the east coast main line? Instead of the brand new, hybrid hydrogen trains that we were promised, we will be getting hybrid trains composed of 30-year-old power cars and 30-year-old discarded carriages from another line.

Chris Grayling: I do not know what stories the Labour party has been listening to. The midland main line will have brand new, bi-mode trains delivered as soon as possible—

Mr Betts: When?

Chris Grayling: In the early 2020s, which is years ahead of what would otherwise have been the case under the original scheme.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Within the context of equity of spending, I wonder whether, after this snow event is over, my right hon. Friend will ask some serious questions about, or even have a review of, why we still seem to be in no way prepared for such events. For example, I discovered yesterday that Heathrow is busy offloading flights because it cannot cope, whereas—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Is this about regional flights?

Mr Duncan Smith: Yes, regional flights. What I am saying is that, given all of that, airports such as Gatwick and others are able to cope. Does my right hon. Friend not think that it is ridiculous that some airports are simply unable to cope while others across the UK can?

Chris Grayling: I know that a number of Members are here today because their flights to regional airports have not been able to take off. I hope and expect that we will be able to sort that out as quickly as possible today, although it is really important that the transport system is run safely. Of course, one of the benefits of the expansion of Heathrow is that the airport would become more resilient to such difficult situations, and connections to regional airports would be more reliable.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to those transport workers who are keeping the system going at this difficult time. The Secretary of State said in his first answer that the
allocation of funding is a rigorous and fair process, so can he explain why the Government have ignored the Office of Rail Regulation’s recommendations by underfunding Scotland by £600 million? Since then his Department has been able to cope with a £240 million loss of revenue as a result of the situation with Southern rail and found £245 million for High Speed 2. The Government have been ignoring the Scottish Government since last July, so will they now meet the Scottish Government, or are these just weasel words about equity of funding?

Chris Grayling: Once again, the Scottish National party is arguing against the use of the Barnett formula. SNP Members love the Barnett formula when they think it is advantageous to them, but when they do not like the Barnett formula, they want to get rid of it. I simply say to them that this Government have followed the principles of the Barnett formula, and actually the Treasury has given Scotland a bit more money above that. I wish the SNP would stop complaining. The reality is that Scotland is now better represented, with a group of Conservative MPs who are much more effective than the SNP ever was in getting this Government to do that bit extra for Scotland.

Reading-Basingstoke Line: Electrification

2. Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the timescale required for the electrification of the Reading to Basingstoke line.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): The Secretary of State’s acceptance of the Hendy review in 2016 recognised the necessity of changes to the scope of Great Western electrification. Following completion of a feasibility assessment of the line between Reading and Basingstoke, it has been identified that electrification of that section is not required to deliver improvements to passangers.

Mr Jayawardena: Given my hon. Friend’s commendable plan to scrap all diesel-only trains from our tracks by 2040, would he consider extending Crossrail from Reading to Basingstoke, as an alternative to Great Western, to improve capacity into London from north Hampshire?

Joseph Johnson: The Department always welcomes suggestions from my hon. Friend. There are no current plans to extend the Crossrail route, and no assessment has yet been made of the amount or availability of any such scheme.

Emissions

3. Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce transport emissions.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): We have very ambitious plans to reduce transport emissions, including by ending the sale of new conventional petrol and diesel cars and vans, and by ending the use of diesel-only trains by 2040. Clean growth strategy actions will reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and the UK plan for reducing nitrogen dioxide concentrations sets out action to tackle hotspots of air pollution. We will shortly be launching our new zero-emissions transport paper, and the House can review that, too.

Vernon Coaker: The Minister will know that 24% of all emissions are transport related. He will know there are hotspots across the country, including in my constituency, and thousands of people die prematurely as a result of poor air quality, including 61 people in my Gedling constituency. How does he intend to accelerate the progress and policy development he has outlined to us today?

Jesse Norman: We absolutely recognise the issues that the hon. Gentleman raises. He will know that we work very closely on this issue, through the joint air quality unit, with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Our specific plans on transport emissions will be released in our report later this month.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Can the Minister assure the House that, as far as the Department for Transport is concerned, “emissions” refers both to carbon and to air quality emissions, such as nitrogen oxide and small particulate matter, and that they are fully addressed together within the Department?

Jesse Norman: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Of course, DEFRA is the lead agency within Government on emissions. Only on Monday we put the renewable transport fuel obligation on the statute book. The obligation specifically balances the two sides of that equation.

4. Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of the early termination of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise.

Virgin Trains East Coast
8. **Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of the early termination of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise.  [904110]

15. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the early termination of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise on (a) passengers and (b) rail services.  [904118]

17. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of the early termination of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise.  [904120]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):**

I am not sure I see any merit in the early termination of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise. That is not something I would wish to happen, but we have to deal with the world as it is, rather than as how we would like it to be.

My priority is to ensure the continued smooth running of the east coast franchise for its passengers and employees, and to make sure that the trains run and deliver the service that people need. As I told the House on 5 February 2018, a new arrangement to operate the railway prior to the new east coast partnership in 2020 needs to be put in place. We are currently conducting a full appraisal of the options, and I will return to the House in due course.

**Ian Mearns:** I am afraid to say that service standards have deteriorated on the east coast line since Virgin-Stagecoach took the franchise—I am a regular customer on that line—despite the best efforts of the excellent staff on board trains and at stations. Those staff face having their sixth employer in a decade and a half. Will the Secretary of State meet me and some of those staff, so that they can express their concerns about the way in which the franchise has been conducted? Will he give the House an undertaking that there is a genuine public sector operator ready to take over should that be required—or has Directly Operated Railways been outsourced already?

**Chris Grayling:** On the last point, I can give an absolute guarantee that that is the case; we have been making preparations for different eventualities for some time and there is a genuine alternative, if that is deemed to be best for the passenger and best value for the taxpayer. My ministerial colleagues and I are ready to talk to staff, but I would correct the hon. Gentleman on one point: the reality is that the independent assessments have shown a higher level of passenger satisfaction on that route since the change of franchise, not a lower one.

**Karen Lee:** I, too, wish to say a huge thank you to you the staff who have been involved in keeping the trains running. As has been said, the current Virgin Trains east coast line franchise agreement will end three years early, making it the third franchise failure in about a decade. As someone who uses the line, I do not agree with the Secretary of State’s assessment of it. But will he recognise that there is a problem and see this as the perfect opportunity to bring the contracts back in house?

**Chris Grayling:** As I have said in this House before, I need to do what is best for passengers and for the taxpayer. The reality is that since the transition, regardless of the fact that Stagecoach clearly got its numbers wrong, passenger satisfaction has risen, more people are being employed by this railway and it is delivering more money to the taxpayer. [ Interruption. ] That is the reality. Labour Members can say it is not true, but it is; it is a fact that they just have to deal with.

**Liz Twist:** I assure the Secretary of State that after three failed franchises and the experiences of a directly operated railway my constituents would much prefer a directly operated railway. Will he commit to providing a directly operated railway service, in the public interest?

**Chris Grayling:** As I have said, I am going to do what is best for the passenger and for the taxpayer. I am sorry that the Labour party does not seem to get this, but the reality is that passenger satisfaction levels are higher today than they were three years ago—that is what the independent research shows. Labour Members may not like it, but it is true.

**Imran Hussain:** Next year, Bradford would have seen a marked increase in the number of much-needed direct inter-city trains serving the city, but the chaos with the east coast line has put that in serious doubt. These extra trains are vital to improving Bradford’s connection to the rest of the country, so will the Minister commit to ensuring that, whatever happens to the east coast franchise, Bradford will see an increase in the number of direct trains?

**Chris Grayling:** This is an important point, so let us be clear: it is my intention that, whatever arrangements are put in place for the next few years, the service improvements that have been promised will be delivered. We face an issue on infrastructure and additional capacities on the northern part of the route, which will have to be resolved and may mean some amendments to the timetable for new services, but that will not stop us delivering those new services. In Bradford’s case, I am expecting to be able to fulfil the commitments that were made.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I agree with my right hon. Friend that there are no merits in the early termination of the franchise, but there are opportunities from the new partnership. My constituency has 10 railway stations, none of which have a direct rail service to London. Does he agree that this is an opportunity to look at providing services to those towns not currently served?

**Chris Grayling:** As I know, my hon. Friend has been a regular advocate for direct services, and I would like to see those happen. I am looking to see whether we can maximise the capacity on the east coast main line to make additional services possible. Of course the arrival of HS2 will allow many services that cannot be run now because of capacity constraints to happen, because of the additional capacity it will create on routes to the north and Scotland.

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con) rose—
Mr Speaker: I am not entirely sure what the impact of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise is on Horsham, but doubtless the hon. Gentleman is about to explain to us with the lucidity for which he is renowned in all parts of the House.

Jeremy Quin: I am absolutely going to. In respect of the proposed alternatives to the current east coast franchise, has the Secretary of State seen President Macron’s recent remarks about the nationalised French railways, and has he any remarks to make on them?

Chris Grayling: Wisdom sometimes comes from our allies across the channel. I did see those remarks, and they are a timely reminder that a nationalised railway is not the panacea that some believe it is.

Mr Speaker: It was not the Horsham perspective, but the international perspective. Why would I expect anything less from someone so illustrious as a man who served as my constituency chairman for three years, for which he deserved a medal?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State says that Stagecoach got its sums wrong, but clearly his Department got its sums wrong, too, when it awarded the franchise to Stagecoach. Surely one merit of this situation should be that failing franchise holders should not be allowed to bid for future franchises. Does the Secretary of State agree that this gives us the opportunity to put the franchise into the public sector, and allow further public sector involvement across all franchises, and review and improve the franchise tender process?

Chris Grayling: We certainly keep the franchise process under continual review to work to improve it but, as I said a moment ago, a public railway is not the panacea that everyone on the Opposition Benches claims it is. I intend to do two things: to take the right decisions for the taxpayer and the travelling public on that route, which is really important, and to act within the law, which is also important.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On Monday, the chief executive of Stagecoach said that he knew there was a problem with the east coast franchise’s finances just weeks after taking over the contract in March 2015, and that he had been talking to the Department about it for two years. Given that the Department was in dialogue with the operator about the difficulties, why did the Secretary of State not put together a contingency plan for the route? The Secretary of State has had two years to sort out this mess; is it not simply incredible that he still does not know what to do?

Chris Grayling: The shadow Secretary of State clearly cannot do his sums, because I have not been Secretary of State for two years. We have been planning—

Andy McDonald: From 2016 to 2018.

Chris Grayling: I have been Secretary of State for 18 months; the shadow Secretary of State cannot do his sums. Since I became aware that there was a problem on the east coast route, we have been doing careful contingency planning, so we have a long-term plan and short-term options for the route. We cannot put those short-term options into place until the appropriate moment arises at which they are necessary. We are prepared for when that moment arises and will deliver the alternatives.

Andy McDonald: Given that the taxpayer has already lost out on more than £2 billion of premium payments, can the Secretary of State advise the House as to whether the financial ramifications of the termination of the franchise are now completely known and concluded? If not, what sums of money are earmarked to settle any further system-gaming demands from Messrs Branson and Souter through litigation or arbitration?

Chris Grayling: Again, the Labour party cannot do its sums. We have no more written off £2 billion than Labour wrote off £1.4 billion when National Express collapsed. The reality is that the east coast is and always has been in recent times a profitable railway. Whatever happens, it will continue to generate a substantial return for the taxpayer. It is about time that Labour did its sums properly, rather than misrepresenting the reality.

HS2: Construction

5. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the need to mitigate the effects of congestion resulting from the construction of HS2 phase 2a.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I know that my hon. Friend is concerned about the impact of traffic in his constituency; indeed, we discussed it when he came to the Department just last week. HS2 Ltd is already working with Highways England and local highways authorities to mitigate the effects of construction traffic, and will continue to do so as the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill progresses. The planning regime established under the Bill includes powers for local planning authorities to approve final construction routes for large goods vehicles. We will work closely with local authorities to make sure that impacts on local communities and traffic are appropriate.

Jack Brereton: Will the Minister update the House on the measures that will be put in place to tackle and mitigate the impact of traffic, and particularly its effect on junction 15 of the M6, resulting from the construction of phase 2a?

Ms Ghani: Indeed, we recognise the need to keep traffic moving on local roads during construction, primarily for the benefit of residents and businesses. Under current plans, junction 15 of the M6 is an important access route for HS2 construction traffic. We recognise that it also provides an important access route to the Stoke-on-Trent area. HS2 Ltd is working closely with Highways England to minimise the impact on the M6 and consider any opportunities for co-ordinated delivery with a smart motorway.

Bus Journeys

6. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of bus journeys in England.

[904107]
12. Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of bus journeys in England.  

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Bus Services Act 2017 presents local authorities with new powers to bring about change and unlock the potential for the bus service industry to increase passenger numbers. Since 1982, bus usage has fallen, but it is variable across the country. Passenger journeys on local bus services in England have decreased by 4% since 2009-10, to 4.44 billion in 2016-17.

Mike Amesbury: Does the Minister believe that there is a link between her Government’s 33% cut to the bus budgets and bus patronage falling to a decade low? What action has the Secretary of State taken over the past 18 months to rectify that?  

Ms Ghani: Bus patronage is actually increasing for people who go to work—3 million people choose to travel to work on a bus—and 60% of people who use public transport use the bus. Increasing bus patronage is at the forefront of the Government’s bus agenda. It is vital to combating congestion and reducing emissions. Government provide about £1 billion of funding for concessionary travel every year, and around £250 million will be paid this year to support bus services in England via the bus service operators’ grant.

Margaret Greenwood: Recent devolution deals have seen the power to re-regulate buses, via London-style franchising, devolved to areas such as my own that have a metro mayor. Can the Minister tell me how the Government plan to support those metro mayors who make the local democratic choice to franchise their bus networks so that local passengers can get the routes that they need?  

Ms Ghani: Mayors have the freedom to do that. It is absolutely right that these decisions are taken locally, whether by the local authority or the mayor. We therefore encourage all local authorities and mayors to consider how they can use enhanced partnership and franchising powers to make improvements for passengers and to increase bus patronage.

Lorry Parking  

7. Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to identify emergency parking sites for lorries when travel across the channel is disrupted.  

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): As my right hon. Friend knows, I have asked Highways England to progress plans to promote a lorry holding area through the normal planning process as a potential permanent solution to Operation Stack. Highways England intends to undertake an initial public consultation on this in the spring, which will consider the scope, scale and function of the lorry area. As he knows, I am frustrated that we have not been able to do this sooner, but the commitment to it is strong.

Damian Green: The Secretary of State is, I know, aware of the extreme urgency of finding a solution to this matter. Even if we assume a full implementation period after Brexit, we could be less than two years away from new customs arrangements at Dover, and problems there could be disastrous not just for roads across Kent, but for the national road haulage industry. Can he assure us that, by the time of Brexit, sufficient off-road parking spaces will be available to avoid a recurrence of Operation Stack?

Chris Grayling: There are two points that I should make. First, on the border, it is absolutely the intent of this Government to maintain a free-flowing border; that is of paramount importance. The other point, be absolutely clear, is that we will have a solution in place for next March which keeps the M20 flowing in both directions and provides a solution if there is congestion at the ports; and that we intend to move beyond that and deliver a long-term solution, which will not only deal with the issue of trouble at the ports, but provide some respite to Kent residents, who I know are fed up with having lorries simply parking on their local roads.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Eighty per cent. of the road freight to and from the UK goes through Dover. There is surely no realistic chance of all those lorries being checked from March next year. Is not the reality that, if we leave the EU without a deal, utter chaos on the road network within miles of Dover is completely unavoidable?

Chris Grayling: No, I do not think that at all. It is for this country to decide how we manage our borders and what checks we put in place. The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that there is a free-flowing border at Dover, and we will deliver that.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is it the Department’s policy that a new fixed link across the channel would help to ease disruption?

Chris Grayling: We should have some big, bold visions for the future. That is the way that we plan properly in transport terms. Our big, bold visions for the country right now are HS2, the potential expansion of Heathrow airport, the lower Thames crossing, the trans-Pennine tunnel, the A303 dualling and the Stonehenge tunnel. This Government have and are delivering lots of big visions for Britain.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The chairman of Maritime UK has said that, if a deal is not reached on Brexit, lorry drivers could be stuck on the main roads to Dover for up to two days. Even if a deal is reached, with a hard border at vital ferry ports, the industry is warning that customs and port health checks will cause massive disruptions. What concrete assurances can the Secretary of State give us that that will not be the case?

Chris Grayling: As I have said before, I have regular dialogue with the haulage industry and the ports sector. I have been very clear to them, as I am being clear in this House today and as the Prime Minister has made clear, that we do not intend to impose a fixed border. We want a free-flowing border and that is what we will deliver.
Rail Franchising

9. Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Whether his Department can prevent a rail operating company from bidding to retain its franchise as a result of that company's performance.

Chris Grayling: The Opposition keep talking about the huge amounts that are paid, but they fail to understand that less than £3 in every £100 that is spent on the railways remains with the companies. The rest is going into the biggest infrastructure investment programme, better services and newer trains—the kind of improvements that people could only dream of in 13 years of Labour Government, but which they are getting under a Conservative Government.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): All franchise operators are required to obtain a pre-qualification passport. The Department may suspend or withdraw a passport in the event that the passport holder triggers certain requirements within the passport application. This would place restrictions on or remove the passport holder from bidding for franchise competitions.

Clive Efford: I take it from that answer that it is possible for the Secretary of State to deny an existing franchise holder the right to rebid in a new tendering process. Govia, which has had the south eastern franchise for a long time, has consistently been a poor performer, so can he remove Govia from the service? If it were to get the franchise, what guarantees can he give to my constituents that they will get the improved service that they deserve?

Chris Grayling: In the case of the south eastern franchise, we will accept the bid that is going to deliver the best possible outcome for the hon. Gentleman's constituents, with longer trains and better services. This is a competitive process. I will not hesitate to remove a passport from a firm when that is required. I also have to operate within European procurement law—something that the Labour party is still very keen on—and that requires me to take a proportionate approach. I will always seek to do that and I will always seek to operate within the law.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Last year, no fewer than 67 million rail journeys were cancelled or severely curtailed. I raised this matter with the Prime Minister yesterday. Most of the compensation paid by Network Rail was trousered by the train operating companies. When they bid to renew their franchises, the compensation structure is much more complex and payments to which they are entitled. Of course, the Department may suspend or withdraw a passport in the event that the passport holder criticising some of the figures he had been passed. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee who was present at that hearing, I would say to her constituents that I am delighted that over the next 12 to 18 months the people of York are going to see every single train, pretty much, that serves their station replaced as new, or brand new trains—trains that they have not seen for decades.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): During the franchise process, business cases get a lot of focus. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) mentioned the Virgin Trains east coast contract and the franchise holder criticising some of the figures he had been passed. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee who was present at that hearing, I can say that the franchise holder actually said that, although the figures were not what he was expecting, they were not an insurmountable barrier to the franchise working. He quoted the Scottish referendum and Brexit, and a declining trend in passenger figures, as the real reason why the franchise failed. When franchises across the companies are being bid for, will my right hon. Friend encourage those companies to have a broader range of dynamic scenario planning so that they get accurate figures?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady talks about a privatised gravy train. I would encourage her to look at the conversation that the French Prime Minister had about a state railway, where he said:

"The dilapidated network, delays, abysmal debt...The situation is alarming, not to say untenable. The French, whether they take the train or not, pay more and more for a public service that works less and less well".

I would say to her constituents that I am delighted that over the next 12 to 18 months the people of York are going to see every single train, pretty much, that serves their station replaced as new, or brand new trains—trains that they have not seen for decades.

Rachael Maskell: That is certainly no apology to our constituents. The Secretary of State's lack of due diligence has caused chief exec David Brown, of embattled Southern rail fame, to announce that he has done a—expletive deleted—good job, and that he will bid again for the next franchise contracts. Virgin and Stagecoach will do the same. These companies are on a huge gravy train at the expense of taxpayers, so why is the Secretary of State being held to ransom and why he is even prepared to consider rewarding their failure?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady talks about a privatised gravy train. I would encourage her to look at the conversation that the French Prime Minister had about a state railway, where he said:

"The dilapidated network, delays, abysmal debt...The situation is alarming, not to say untenable. The French, whether they take the train or not, pay more and more for a public service that works less and less well".

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Road Safety

10. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): When he plans to meet representatives of the road safety sector to discuss road safety policy. [R]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Since becoming road safety Minister, I have met the hon. Gentleman several times, as well as a broad range of road safety organisations and others with an interest in road safety, to discuss many different issues. Those institutions include RoadPeace, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, the RAC, the AA and many others.

Mr Sheerman: I congratulate the Minister on his keen interest in this subject; I have been impressed by him so far. However, is it not the case that there are still 1,720 knocks on the door by a policeman or a policewoman who says that your daughter, your son, your mum, your dad, your grandmother or your grandfather are dead? That is the truth, so we cannot be complacent. Can we now look to having a national investigatory body to investigate every death on the road? Will the Minister also talk to his overseas development colleagues, given that 1.3 million people worldwide die in road accidents every year? Is it not time that we did something to help them?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are very closely involved in supporting nations around the world to raise road safety standards; he has been involved in that himself. With regard to a national body, we have looked at that. I am sure that he will take some comfort from the fact that only today we are laying regulations that allow driving instructors to undertake motorway driving with learners. That is part of a much wider pushback to improve driving quality and reduce fatalities.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The previous Transport Committee's June 2016 inquiry into all-lane running concluded that 8% non-compliance with red X signals was unacceptable. In their response, the Government agreed, promising to tackle it through a combination of education and enforcement. In January this year, the chief executive of Highways England wrote to me with an update, stating that "we have reduced levels of non-compliance with red-X signals to 8%".

How can it be acceptable for the Government to be continuing to roll out all-lane running when it appears to have made zero progress on reducing these dangerous driving offences?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady will be aware, a study has been done on all-lane running showing that, if anything, it may be safer than the previous arrangements, and that is to be welcomed. We will be making an announcement on red X signals fairly imminently.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Does the Minister not recognise the correlation between his Government's decision to scrap road safety targets, introduced by Labour, and their failure to reduce the number of those seriously injured or killed on our roads?

Jesse Norman: I am a little reluctant to get into the statistics game with the hon. Gentleman. He will be aware, however, that for the year ending September 2017 road fatalities fell by 4% and overall road injuries fell by 5%, compared with the previous year. The picture is mixed and generally heading in the right direction.

11. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce road injuries and deaths.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): In December 2015 the Department for Transport published the road safety statement “Working Together to Build a Safer Road System”, and we are making excellent progress in delivering its objectives. I am pleased to announce today that the Department has, at our third attempt, commissioned an objective scientific study to understand the relationship between tyre degradation, the passage of time and the effect on tyre safety. Two earlier attempts to commission that research were unavailing. The guidance given has been very effective in this area, but that marks a further move towards better road safety.

Jessica Morden: My constituents Julian and Gill Smith, who tragically lost their daughter Rhiannon nearly a year ago in a car collision, are now campaigning for better preventive action. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and ask that the Minister looks seriously at calls by campaign groups such as Brake to establish a UK road collision investigation branch, so that we can have more crash data and evidence to prevent deaths and injuries on our roads.

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady says, that is a tragic incident for the family concerned, and one's heart goes out to them. As I said to the hon. Member for Huddersfield, we continue to look closely at the possibility of setting up such a national body.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): In the last 15 years, there have been 340 casualties on the notorious A417 near the Air Balloon pub. There have been 148 accidents in the last five years alone. Will my hon. Friend join me in warmly welcoming the landmark of reaching the consultation stage on the shortlisted new roads scheme? Does he agree that, by backing that project, this Government are committed to saving lives on Gloucestershire's roads?

Jesse Norman: Of course I welcome that. As my hon. Friend will be aware, it has been the product of a great deal of hard work by local campaigners and the Department over a considerable period.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Would the Minister consider reducing the drink-drive limit? The reduction in Northern Ireland and Scotland has led to fewer deaths and injuries on the road and less work for the police. It is surely the most obvious thing to do.

Jesse Norman: We continue to keep the situation under review. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, there have been moves in that direction in Scotland. As that policy works its way through, we will continue to look closely at the issue.

Road Improvements

13. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the condition of local roads.

[904116]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Department published its latest statistics on road conditions in England in January 2018, which show that local classified roads are improving, with fewer local roads to be considered for maintenance. There is still much to do, which is why the Government have committed record levels of investment, including more than £6 billion to highways maintenance up to 2020-21, as well as having an action fund to combat potholes totalling £296 million in this Parliament, which colleagues across the House will warmly welcome.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. He will be aware that Shropshire Council has submitted a very effective business case, supported by our local enterprise partnership, for the funding of the north-west relief road in Shrewsbury, which is the final bit of the circular around our town. What steps is he taking to ensure that the scheme is looked upon favourably?

Jesse Norman: I am absolutely aware of that. My hon. Friend has been a tireless campaigner for that road over the years. I reassure him that we recognise the concern that he indicates. The Department has received the funding bid for the Shrewsbury north-west relief road, and it is being actively and currently considered.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Government are intending to close the driving test centre in Pontypridd and move it to Llantrisant, which will make it far more convenient for people in the Rhondda—one of the poorest constituencies in the land—and probably more difficult for people cost-effectively to learn how to drive safely. It will also put the driving test centre in a place that does not have suitable roads for people to do the test properly. Will the Minister look again at closing the Pontypridd driving test centre?

Mr Speaker: That is what is called the art of shoehorning in the tangential.

Chris Bryant: I did it nicely.

Mr Speaker: He did do it nicely. We congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his ingenuity.

Jesse Norman: One wonders if style is everything in these matters or whether content should have a place at some point. The answer to that question is that of course we will continue to look at it, but I doubt the answer will change.

Community Transport

14. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support community transport operators.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): In the 2016-17 financial year, the Department spent almost £3.5 million on supporting the community transport sector through the bus services operators’ grant, and since January 2013 it has devolved approximately £2.9 million of that grant to support local councils’ community transport services. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the Department is currently consulting on changes to the law and guidance on the use of section 19 and section 22 permits. The consultation closes on 4 May.

Nigel Mills: The Minister will know that the changes on which he is consulting pose a real threat to the future of some operators. What more can he do to protect the existing use of permits rather than require what are generally small local charities to move to the full commercial status of the operator licence?

Jesse Norman: As colleagues will know, I have spent a lot of time working with the bodies responsible for the sector and visiting local community transport organisations. I take my hat off to them for the astonishing work that they do, which is, in a way, a form of social care as much as a form of transport, if not more so. Our consultation document, which I am sure my hon. Friend will have read, lays out three potential exemptions: derogations from commercial operators in favour of community transport operators, showing that there is in fact no competition in specific cases; a potential distance exemption of 15 miles from a particular hub; and the separation of commercial and non-commercial activities. We expect them to receive a lot of comments. I am not aware of a direct threat to any operators in particular, but we very much seek their feedback.

Mr Speaker: Notwithstanding what the Minister said about the hat—he talked about taking his hat off—I would not have thought he would want to do so in the present weather, as a protective function.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Many community transport operators use diesel vehicles, so what representations have the UK Government made to the German Government to hold Volkswagen to account for its emissions scandal?

Jesse Norman: It is the Rhondda valley by proxy. We continue to press the German Government hard on the issue and regard the behaviour of Volkswagen as unacceptable. We are greatly improving the emissions regime, toughening up the testing regime and taking active steps to penalise the use of defeat devices.

Infrastructure: Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire

16. Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What estimate his Department has made of the amount that will be invested in transport infrastructure in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire between 2010 and 2020.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): In the east midlands, almost £7 billion has been spent on transport since 2010, improving connectivity, shortening journey times, reducing congestion and transporting people, ideas and goods. In Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, that has included £371 million from Government for extensions to the Nottingham tram system, and £4.5 million for the new station at Ilkeston.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Indeed, the Government have a proud record on transport infrastructure. More transport infrastructure has been planned in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire over these 10 years than ever before. I welcome the proposals for the A38 and smart
motorways, and for the Derby and Nottingham stations. May I suggest to my hon. Friend that we also consider smaller projects, which will make vast improvements, and may I put in a bid for the Ashbourne bypass?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend has been a great advocate of transport locally and is obviously an expert in the field, as a previous Minister in the Department. He is absolutely right that we are investing in the biggest upgrade of the midland main line since it was completed in 1870. It is, however, for Derbyshire County Council to assess the need for that particular project in Ashbourne, and to decide whether to work on plans to deliver it. If the council applies for appropriate Government funding, we would be pleased to consider its bid.

Mr Speaker: I know that the hon. Lady will accept that he was not merely a Minister in the Department but the Secretary of State and a right hon. Gentleman of notable industry and distinction.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): The previous speaker said a lot of things about the possibility of getting extra money spent in Derbyshire. What he failed to do—this is very important—is say that when the electrification of the midland main line was put forward in this House, it was decided that it would go only as far as Kettering and Corby. Should not the question now be about the wholesale electrification of the midland main line, which would result in people in Derbyshire being better off?

Ms Ghani: I apologise to my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) for my earlier mistake.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Resign!

Ms Ghani: Perhaps not right now, but I will consider it in future. I was expecting a question on High Speed 2.

Mr Skinner: I’m saving that.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman is saving it—that is wonderful. Perhaps he will even acknowledge the great jobs that will be coming along the line. On electrification, Labour’s 2007 rail strategy stated that “it would not be prudent to commit now to ‘all-or-nothing’ projects, such as network-wide electrification... for which the longer-term benefits are currently uncertain and which could delay tackling the current strategic priorities such as capacity.”

The Government believe that it is vital to deliver for passengers and for the taxpayer.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Between 2016 and 2021 the east midlands will receive just 3.2% of all transport investment, and that is exacerbated by the cancellation of the electrification of the Midland main line. That electrification is wanted by business and communities, and it is better value, better for the environment, and has a brilliant business case. Why are Ministers in the Department for Transport the only ones who do not understand that?

Ms Ghani: We have not yet fully announced what we will be doing on electrification, and at times some of the information shared is not entirely accurate. The Government have supported the midlands with HS2, and by investing £1.8 billion in the region’s motorways and trunk roads, and £1.7 billion in the local growth fund. We are also investing £25 million to develop and progress a transformational strategy across the midlands with Midlands Connect.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Members for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) who missed out on substantive questions can seek to catch my eye during topical questions.

Topical Questions

T1. [904126] Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Briefly, let me inform the House that the Space Bill has completed its passage through Parliament, and I extend my thanks to all Members involved in the debate. That debate was conducted in good humour by Members from across the House, and we all share the aspiration for this Bill to pave the way for a thriving commercial space sector in the United Kingdom.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Is the Secretary of State aware that Network Rail and Govia Thameslink have committed to ensuring that eight-carriage trains are introduced between Cambridge and King’s Lynn by the end of the year, which is vital to relieving unacceptable levels of congestion? Will he help to ensure that that commitment is honoured?

Chris Grayling: I will certainly do that, and I also recommit to the improvements needed in Ely, which are essential over the next control period to unlocking those capacity improvements that are needed for the growth and development of those parts of Cambridgeshire.

T2. [904127] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Since 1979 the distinctive yellow and green minibuses of Ealing Community Transport have provided a vital lifeline for the disabled and elderly of the borough, but changed Government guidance now threatens the existence of that award-winning social enterprise. A delegation of volunteer drivers came to see me nearly in tears. They are mostly pensioners and they do not have the time, resources or inclination to retrain for the passenger carrying vehicle licence that is now demanded. Will the Minister think again?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): As the hon. Lady is aware, the matter is currently out to consultation, although it does not cover the certificate of professional competence, which will be handled separately. As I have indicated, there are many workarounds for this issue, and there is no reason for any community transport company to be adversely worried. There is a misalignment between EU law and UK law, and there may be some players who, unfortunately,
are operating in a commercial way. That is how the matter rests, and we will do everything we can to protect community transport operators that are doing a good job.

T3. [904128] Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is wonderful that so many new technologically superior trains are being introduced on Britain's railways, but many passengers are complaining that some of them have cramped and uncomfortable seats. We do not want to have Ryanair on the tracks. Will the Minister do all he can to ensure that the specifications for those new trains have passenger comfort at their heart?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): Train seating is required to address the comfort of passengers and to conform to relevant design standards, including on fire safety and crushworthiness. We do not want passengers to feel that they need to bring in their own inflatable cushions, and my hon. Friend will take comfort in the fact that seats normally become more comfortable over time through use.

T4. [904129] Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is now over 800 days since the Government promised to research a new law on pavement parking. Will the Minister or the Secretary of State give me an update on what progress has been made?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I am grateful for the question. We will be making an announcement later in spring.

T7. [904132] Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Last weekend, and so completely unrelated to the current weather, Southern rail passengers at Redhill suffered the most appalling, shambolic and potentially dangerous scenes. I appreciate that underlying that situation might be the extremely good investment programme, but what assurances has the Minister received that these awful scenes will not be repeated?

Chris Grayling: Let me say very clearly and unequivocally that what took place last Sunday was unacceptable. On behalf of the Government, I apologise for it and the company has already done so. We have made our views known to the company in the strongest possible terms. It was unacceptable and lessons have to be learned. The company is putting in place arrangements to make sure people receive appropriate financial compensation. It must not happen again.

T5. [904130] Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Last Friday, I arranged a site meeting between Network Rail and the YMCA for south London to talk about an abandoned strip of land owned by Network Rail on Rialto road in Mitcham, close to Eastfields station, in the hope that they can together provide some great prefab housing for young people. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can encourage Network Rail to use all its scraps of land to the benefit of everyone?

Joseph Johnson: I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this issue. It is really important that we make the most of all such opportunities for Network Rail to put scraps of land to good use, whether for housing, strips of walkway, or other pedestrian or cycling purposes. I am happy to meet her to discuss that.

T8. [904133] Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What is the Department doing to help more people to cycle safely, as happens in such cities as Amsterdam and Copenhagen, especially given the startling revelation to the joint air quality Committee by Professor Stephen Holgate that drivers and passengers are inhaling up to 10 times more poor quality air than cyclists and pedestrians on the street?

Jesse Norman: The answer to that question is a great deal, with more to come. I was very pleased to be able to go to the meeting of the all-party group on air pollution, of which my hon. Friend is a member, with Chris Boardman. That is an excellent example of how an individual initiative in Manchester can be used to drive great change. The cycle safety review is coming up shortly and will look at a very wide range of issues relating to cycling, including recent information on some of the impacts on air quality. As he says, cycling is remarkably good for the body and soul of the people who do it.

T6. [904134] Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Cheshire Oaks in my constituency is a great success story, with increased investment leading to another 300 jobs. However, it is very difficult for those living in Neston in the other part of the constituency to access those jobs because there are no bus services in the evening and Cheshire Oaks is open until 8 o'clock at night. Is that not a sorry state of affairs and can we not do more to help people to get into work?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Bus services, what journeys they take and how frequently they are run, are down to the local authority. I therefore urge the hon. Gentleman to discuss this matter with his local authority, which can take it forward with local bus service providers.

T10. [904135] Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State for visiting my constituency recently. On that occasion, I was pleased to give him the Stoke-on-Trent HS2 masterplan. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on his plans to make Stoke-on-Trent HS2-ready?

Chris Grayling: First, I want to put on the record again my commitment to making sure that Stoke is in receipt of an HS2 service when the route opens. The local authority’s plans for Stoke station are very exciting and I want to work on them with my hon. Friend and the local authority.

T9. [904136] Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The western side of the M60, in the process of the upgrading to the smart motorway system, has seen congestion, gridlock and horror for commuting traffic on a daily basis. Even now, the 50 mph limit remains in place. When will we see progress?

Chris Grayling: I know that these works have taken longer than intended. I have spoken to Highways England and we want to get this situation resolved as quickly as
possible. It is certainly the case—I speak as somebody who travels from time to time to Old Trafford—that the area is surrounded by roadworks on the motorway and the work on the new extension to the M6 Metrolink. I hope the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge, however, that this is a sign that the Government are making sure there is investment in, and resource provided to, Manchester, where transport investment on this scale has not happened for a long time.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know from our many previous conversations that the people of Plymouth have waited too long to see improvements on their rail link, so I am grateful for his Department’s response yesterday, but when can they expect to see something delivered—some work completed—on Dawlish, which I know is his No. 1 responsibility?

Joseph Johnson: Protecting the line at Dawlish is a national priority of utmost importance and we are determined to find a permanent solution for this vital connection. Some £15 million of funding has been provided to Network Rail to take this forward and planning and development work is well under way. There will be no unnecessary delay, and we will complete this work as soon as we can within the law.

Mr Speaker: It is very good to see the hon. Member for Hove back in his place. I call Mr Peter Kyle.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Thank you so much, Mr Speaker. There is one set of tracks and one franchise operator between London and Brighton, but there are three separate pricing structures. I urge the Secretary of State and the Rail Minister to think about implementing the Gibb recommendation to lower the pricing to the lowest possible one—the Thameslink one—for a two-year period. That could be done with no technical changes whatever, and it would have a transformative impact on passengers who have suffered so much in the last few years.

Chris Grayling: We are working our way through the recommendations of the Gibb report, and we are working our way through the automation of ticketing, which I think is a prerequisite of the broader fares reform that is necessary. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the keyGo card has just launched across the Govia Thameslink Railway network, and that smart ticketing is progressing. That will provide the opportunity for fares reform in a way that has not been there previously.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): During the recent appalling weather, Worcestershire County Council has been sharing information about where the nearest grit bin can be found, and getting the gritters out on the road. Will the Secretary of State join me in praising them for helping residents to prepare for the recent appalling conditions?

Jesse Norman: I absolutely praise them, and I am delighted that we have ample stocks on hand to deal with the current inconveniences. I put my hat squarely back on my head to deal with that on a personal level. Not least of the joys of this particular scheme and approach is that they open the way to Herefordshire, a place that I know the House will wish to visit on regular occasions.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that no money was spent in control period 5 on supporting enhancements to the rail infrastructure in north Wales. Having seen the unanimity in north Wales and in north-west England on Monday this week, does he not accept that our time has come for cross-border rail investment?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I went to that event and made a commitment. I praise my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) for bringing the event together and thank all the Members from north Wales who attended. I gave a clear indication of the Government’s sympathy with the need for the Crewe hub. I talked about the re-signalling on parts of the route, which will improve performance on the line. The hon. Gentleman will be aware, as the Member of Parliament for Wrexham, that we are now carrying out the study on how we deliver a proper service on the Wrexham to Bidston line. Under this Government, the time has certainly come for transport improvements.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): BACT—Becceles and Bungay area community transport—plays a key strategic role in north Suffolk in serving remote rural areas and many vulnerable people. Will the Minister assure me that in assessing the feedback from his current consultation, his No. 1 objective will be to put the future of organisations such as BACT on a sustainable, long-term financial footing?

Jesse Norman: I can absolutely assure him that the Department’s goal has always been to manage this process with as little impact as possible and ultimately to the benefit of the community transport sector, if we possibly can.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Minister and his predecessor have been supportive of my trailer safety campaign and #towsafe4freddie, following Freddie Hussey’s tragic death in 2014. Does he agree with me that the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill, which is currently going through the Lords, offers a fantastic opportunity to further highlight the importance of trailer safety?

Jesse Norman: I absolutely recognise the campaign that the hon. Lady fought, and I think it is very worthwhile. I slightly doubt whether what she suggests is in fact the case, but attempts can of course be made within the rules. This is a very narrowly defined piece of legislation that focuses very specifically on permitting and on trailer registration, so there may not be scope to add other things, but I continue to be delighted to talk to her about the campaign that she is waging.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): From the need for a final fix to the A40 to urgent upgrades to the Cotswold line, the need for a boost to west Oxfordshire’s transport is now acute. Will Ministers agree to work with me to make it happen?
Chris Grayling: The A40 is one of the roads that could benefit from the creation of the major roads network. It is precisely designed to deal with those second-tier roads that are clogged up by the last Labour Government and tend to fall through the cracks between decision making in local communities and the national work done on the strategic road network. My expectation is that my hon. Friend and his local authority will be beating a path to my door when that funding is first released. However, I would say that his railway line is getting new trains much sooner than that, which I hope will be a benefit to his constituents.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Ministers say that they want to reduce roadside emissions. The road leading from the port of Liverpool has some of the biggest air quality problems in the country. Will the Secretary of State listen to calls for investment in rail freight as an answer to the problem?

Chris Grayling: This is precisely why I am so pleased to have started feasibility work on the reopening of the Skipton to Colne railway line, a route that could provide an important link across the Pennines. It is no doubt a matter of real frustration that it takes eight to nine hours for a freight train to travel from the port of Liverpool to the power station at Drax, and it is clear to me that we need additional transpennine capacity. This is one route that could deliver it. I look forward to seeing the conclusions from that study at the end of the year, which I think is the likely timetable.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This week of all weeks, rail passengers want up-to-date information about delays and cancellations, but Southeastern’s website has failed to provide any live-time updates in any single rush hour this week, today included. Will Ministers bear that in mind when the franchise comes up for renewal?

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is a powerful champion of his constituents, and he is right to expect Southeastern to provide prompt, accurate and timely information so that passengers can have journeys of the quality that they deserve.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent Jim Irvine, who was active all his life, now suffers from motor neurone disease, and, like many other people, relies on his mobility scooter for independence. Scooters are currently banned from the Tyne and Wear metro. What will the Secretary of State do to remedy the situation, and will he give assurances that our promised new rolling stock will include provision for mobility scooters?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Lady says, it is time that we had new rolling stock on the Newcastle-upon-Tyne metro. I expect to see updated, modern rolling stock that can provide proper accessibility for people with disabilities. The decision about the configuration will of course be made locally, but I certainly expect the money that is available to be spent on disability-compliant rolling stock.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give us an update on the progress of the negotiations on air connections with the European Union after we leave in March next year?

Chris Grayling: The European Commission has published its negotiating position on aviation links. There have been a lot of scare stories around over the last few months, but the Commission has said that in all circumstances—whether or not we have a trade deal, and whether or not we have an implementation period—there must be an aviation agreement. There is a recognition on the Commission’s side that the flights need to continue, and there is an absolute commitment on our side. I met my Spanish counterpart yesterday, and we agreed that it was essential for flights to continue. We will all work to ensure that there is absolutely no interruption in services.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State understand the severe disappointment and anger in the far south-west about the sham of a south-west rail strategy that was published yesterday? Will he now do the right thing, and, instead of re-spinning the £50 million that has already been announced, match Labour’s £2.5 billion rail investment plan for the south-west?

Chris Grayling: I will take no lessons from the party that did nothing for transport in the south-west over a long period. This Government are doing things that Labour never did—dualling the A303, providing brand-new trains, and resignalling in Cornwall to increase the number of rail services. The hon. Gentleman should be embarrassed about his party’s record.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are very short of time. In fact, we have run out of time. We have had some very comprehensive answers, for which we are grateful, but I will take only two more questions, if the questions and answers are very short.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the Minister please look into the concerns that a flyover and tunnel at Stonehenge will damage the valuable archaeological site at Blick Mead?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend will be interested to know that I sent a message of welcome to the team from the International Council on Monuments and Sites that is currently considering the issue of Stonehenge. Of course we will look into my hon. Friend’s concerns, and he is welcome to write to me with further details.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): When will the Government catch up with the rest of the world and take advantage of a quick, easy, cost-effective way of reducing transport emissions by introducing E10 fuel?

Jesse Norman: We are reviewing that option at the moment. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it would require legislation, but we are already giving considerable support to the ethanol industry, and we are continuing to look into it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but now we really must move on.
Leveson Inquiry

10.39 am

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the Leveson inquiry and its implementation, and the freedom of the press.

Over many centuries in Britain, our press has held the powerful to account and been free to report and investigate without fear or favour. These principles underpin our democracy and are integral to our freedom as a nation. Today, in a world of the internet and clickbait, our press face critical challenges that threaten their livelihood and sustainability, with declining circulations and a changing media landscape. It is in this context that we approach the Leveson inquiry, which was set up seven years ago in 2011 and reported six years ago in 2012 in response to events over a decade ago.

The Leveson inquiry was a diligent and thorough examination of the culture, practices and ethics of our press in response to illegal and improper press intrusion. There were far too many cases of terrible behaviour, and, having met some of the victims, I understand the impact this had.

From the start, I want to thank Sir Brian for his work. The inquiry lasted over a year and heard evidence from more than 300 people, including journalists, editors and victims. Three major police investigations examined a wide range of offences, and more than 40 people were convicted. The inquiry and investigations were comprehensive, and since it was set up the terms of reference for a part 2 of the inquiry have largely been met. There have also been extensive reforms to policing practices and significant changes to press self-regulation.

The Independent Press Standards Organisation has been established and now regulates 95% of national newspapers by circulation. It has taken significant steps to demonstrate its independence as a regulator, and in 2016 Sir Joseph Pilling concluded that IPSO had largely complied with Leveson’s recommendations. There have been further improvements since, and I hope there will be more to come. In November last year, for instance, IPSO introduced a new system of low-cost arbitration. It has processed more than 40,000 complaints in its first three years of operation, and it has ordered multiple front-page corrections or clarifications. Newspapers have also made improvements to their governance frameworks to improve internal controls, standards and compliance, and one regulator, IMPRESS, has been recognised under the royal charter. Extensive reforms to policing practices have been made, too: the College of Policing has published a code of ethics and developed national guidance for police officers on how to engage with the press, and we have legislated in the Policing and Crime Act 2017 to strengthen protections for police whistleblowers.

It is clear that we have seen significant progress from publications, from the police and from the new regulator, and the media landscape today is markedly different from that which Sir Brian looked at in 2011. The way in which we consume news has changed dramatically. Newspaper circulation has fallen by about 30% since the conclusions of the Leveson inquiry, and, although digital circulation is rising, publishers are finding it much harder to generate revenue online. In 2015, for every £100 newspapers lost in print revenue, they gained only £3 in digital revenue.

Our local papers in particular are under severe pressure. Local papers help to bring together local voices and shine a light on important local issues—in communities, in courtrooms, in council chambers—and as we devolve power further to local communities they will become even more important, yet over 200 local newspapers have closed since 2005, including two in my constituency. These are the new challenges.

There are also challenges that were only in their infancy back in 2011. We have seen a dramatic and continued rise in social media, which is largely unregulated, and issues such as clickbait, fake news, malicious disinformation and online abuse threaten high-quality journalism.

The foundation of any successful democracy is a sound basis for democratic discourse. That is under threat from these new forces, and that requires urgent attention. These are today’s challenges and this is where we need to focus, especially as more than £48 million was spent on the police investigations and the inquiry.

During the consultation, 12% of direct respondents were in favour of reopening the Leveson inquiry, with 66% against. We agree and this is the position we set out in the Conservative party manifesto. Sir Brian, whom I thank for his service, agrees that the inquiry should not proceed under the current terms of reference but believes that it should continue in an amended form. We do not believe that reopening this costly and time consuming public inquiry is the right way forward, so considering all the factors that I have outlined to the House today, I hope there will be action to safeguard the lifeblood of our democratic discourse and tackle the challenges that our media face—today, not a decade ago.

During the consultation, we also found serious concerns that section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 would exacerbate the problems the press faces rather than solve them. Respondents were worried that it would impose further financial burdens, especially on the local press. As one high profile figure put it very clearly: “Newspapers...are already operating in a tough environment. These proposals will make it tougher and add to the risk of self-censorship...The threat of having to pay both sides' costs—no matter what the challenge—would have the effect of leaving journalists questioning every report that named an individual or included the most innocuous data about them.”

He went on to say that section 40 risks “damaging the future of a paper that you love” and that the impact will be to “make it much more difficult for papers...to survive”.

These are not my words, Mr Speaker, but those of Alastair Campbell talking about the chilling threat of section 40—and if anyone knows about threats to the press it is Alastair Campbell. Only 7% of direct respondents favoured full commencement of section 40. By contrast, 79% favoured full repeal. We have therefore decided not to commence section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 and to seek repeal at the earliest opportunity. Action is needed based not on what might have been needed years ago but on what is needed to address today’s problems. Our new digital charter sets out the overarching programme...
of work to agree norms and rules for the online world and put them into practice. Under the charter, our internet safety strategy is looking at online behaviour and we will firmly tackle the problems of online abuse. Our review of the sustainability of high-quality journalism will address concerns about the impact of the internet on our news and media. It will do this in a forward-looking way, so we can respond to the challenges of today, not the challenges of yesterday.

The future of a vibrant press matters to us all. There has been a huge public response to our consultation and I want to thank every one of the 174,000 respondents as well as all those who signed petitions. We have carefully considered all the evidence we received. We have consulted widely, with regulators, publications and victims of press intrusion. The world has changed since the Leveson inquiry was established in 2011. Since then, we have seen a seismic change in the media landscape. The work of the inquiry and the reforms since have had a huge impact on public life. We thank Sir Brian for lending his dedication and expertise to the undertaking of this inquiry.

At national and local levels, a press that can hold the powerful to account remains an essential component of our democracy. We need high-quality journalism to thrive in the new digital world. We seek a press and a media that are robust and independently regulated and that report without fear or favour. The steps I have set out today will help give Britain a vibrant, independent and free press that holds the powerful to account and rises to the challenges of our times. I commend the statement to the House.

10.49 am

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): As I have said through you before, Mr Speaker, timing is everything in politics. If I am looking a little breathless and fatigued this morning, it is because I have been carrying a heavy load in the past hour, lifting weights in the gym and visualising Paul Dacre. For the increasing number of colleagues who do not read the Daily Mail any more, I refer them to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I shall take the Mosley issue head on. If I had thought for one moment that he held the views contained in that leaflet of 57 years ago, I would not have given him the time of day. He is, however, a man who, in the face of great family tragedy and overwhelming media intimidation, chose to use his limited resources to support the weak against the strong.

On this issue, I would like to thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement, not just in the last half hour but over and over again, year after year. This announcement, conveniently timed to be buried under a flurry of snow, is a disappointment, a breach of trust and a bitter blow to the victims of press intrusion, but it is not in any way a surprise. We now know for certain what we have suspected all the time. When a Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, joined the other party leaders to say that he would keep his promises to the victims of phone hacking, he and his party were acting not out of conviction but out of weakness. For a brief period of time, and for the first time ever, our political parties had more to gain politically by standing up to the tabloid media than by bowing down to them. When every Conservative MP who was then in Parliament backed this policy, including the current Prime Minister and the present Secretary of State, they did not really mean it. They were waiting for the wind to change and for the fuss to die down. They were waiting for a time when they could, as quietly as possible, break their promises, and today that time has finally come.

We already knew what the Conservatives really thought, when successive Secretaries of State refused to implement section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, the part of the Leveson system that would provide access to justice for ordinary citizens while offering protection to journalists and newspapers that signed up to any Leveson-compliant self-regulatory body. The papers, absurdly, caricatured it as state regulation, and pointed instead to the independence of their alternative, non-Leveson-compliant regulator, the Independent Press Standards Organisation. The Government were too scared to make the case for their own policy, and finally, today, they are formally capitulating.

The Government are also capitulating on the question of whether to complete the investigation into how phone hacking happened and what is happening now. Underlying the phone hacking scandal, we saw one of the biggest corporate scandals and one of the biggest corporate governance failures of modern times. The Secretary of State says that the terms of reference of Leveson 2 have largely been met, but I do not agree. Here are some of the things that Leveson 2 was supposed to investigate: to inquire into the extent of illegality at News International; to inquire into the way the police investigated allegations relating to News International and other newspaper groups; to inquire into whether the police received corrupt payments and were complicit in suppressing the proper investigation of complaints; and to inquire into the extent of corporate governance and management failures at News International and other organisations. None of those questions has been answered, and by betraying the victims of phone hacking in this statement today, the Secretary of State is trying to ensure that they never will be. I ask him this question: if it is revealed that the criminality that took place at the News of the World extended to other newspapers, will he reconsider his position?

The last thing the Murdoch empire, the Rothermere empire, the Barclay brothers’ empire or the Mirror Group wanted was an inquiry into their dirty laundry, with powers under the Inquiries Act 2005 to obtain documents and compel witnesses to appear in public. The last thing any of the newspapers wanted was more attention being paid to their methods at a time when it may well be revealed very soon that other papers, not necessarily the ones at the centre of the scandal in 2011, were also involved in criminality. They have been lobbying hard for today’s outcome. They will give the Secretary of State—a man who enjoys favourable headlines—plaudits in tomorrow’s leader columns. We already know that Paul Dacre, Rupert Murdoch and the Barclay brothers approve of his statement—at after all, they helped to write it. The Secretary of State could have chosen to do the right thing, but instead he chose not to stand up to the
Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. Not only have I made this statement today, but I will also be publishing a full response to the consultation, with full details—I will place a copy in the Library. I look forward to coming before the Select Committee to discuss this question narrowly, and also to discuss the wider actions we are taking, in which my hon. Friend is playing an important part, to make sure that we have a sound basis for political discourse in this country.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for prior sight of his statement. I wrote to him on 22 February seeking an update on progress with the inquiry and asking if and when it would be implemented. I am pleased he has come to the Dispatch Box today at least to clarify that.

The Secretary of State will also be aware that the Scottish National party is absolutely committed to ensuring that the practices that led to Leveson in the first place do not happen again. Our position has always been that, should a UK-wide part 2 of Leveson go ahead, it must take into account the distinct legal context in Scotland.

We firmly believe that all individuals should have a right to redress when they feel that they have been a victim of malpractice. However, the Scottish Government have absolutely no plans to introduce statutory incentives for the press in Scotland to sign up to a state-approved regulator. Press regulation and the operation of the civil courts are areas that are clearly within the devolved competence of the Scottish Parliament, so can the Secretary of State assure us that he will respect the devolution settlement and the independence of the Scottish legal system? Does he agree that, by not doing so, he would set a dangerous precedent in determining the ability of the Scottish Parliament to take decisions in devolved areas?

Matt Hancock: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. It is, of course, part of the devolution settlement that these issues are dealt with in Scotland. I of course respect the separate and distinct legal system in this area. He asks whether we will respect that in future, and he knows as well as I do that amendments have been made to the Data Protection Bill in the other place—that Bill will have its Second Reading in this House on Monday—that, with respect to data protection only, require a Leveson 2-type inquiry and the commencement of section 40 on a UK-wide basis. I look forward to discussing with the hon. Gentleman how we can make sure that we have the respect we need for the devolution settlement and for the Scottish press. The single best way that we can deal with the problem he rightly raises is by disposing of those amendments in their entirety.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Does he agree that, now more than ever, newspapers play a vital role in holding both the Government and the Opposition to account? He is absolutely right that, rather than looking backwards at the events of 10 years ago and adding to the costs of local newspapers, we should be supporting newspapers in meeting the challenges of the internet giants.
Matt Hancock: I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. Friend, not least because, as he points out, one of the jobs of a Secretary of State is to look forward and consider how to solve the problems of today. The problems of local newspapers are not a marginal or side issue. More than 200 local papers have closed in the past decade and a bit, including local papers in my patch. I do not want to see that accelerated by the actions of this House, and that is what would happen if we do not take the course of action I have proposed today.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Having spent many hours with the Dowler family, Christopher Jefferies and many others, may I say on behalf of all the victims that many of us will feel that the Secretary of State has shoved another little knife in our heart? In all honesty, we had hoped that the promises were real promises that we would get to the truth—not just the bits and pieces that were able to be dealt with, as Sir Brian said, but the elements that were expressly excluded from the original investigation, particularly the Metropolitan police’s collusion with the press, which could not be looked at at all.

I find it inconceivable that the Secretary of State talks only about the freedom of the press—of course the freedom of the press is important—because to many of us, it is also important that politicians should be able to speak without fear or favour. That means we should no longer be cowed by press barons; we should be able to do what is right for society. I simply ask the Secretary of State why on earth, if everything he has said today is true, did the Government make all those promises in the past, and why did he vote for the legislation?

Matt Hancock: The world has changed since 2011. The truth is that the rise of the internet means that some of the issues the hon. Gentleman rightly raises about making sure the debate we have is a reasonable one, not one based on abuse and bullying, are much broader. Tackling the problems of today is our task now. Of course there were abuses that were looked into during the inquiry, and they have been looked into by the police in three investigations, with over 40 criminal convictions since. The judgment we have to make is: what is the best thing to do for the future of this country, when the way in which we debate politics and make decisions is under challenge, because of new technology, in a way it has not been for decades if not centuries? Getting those solutions right is mission-critical to our future as a liberal democracy, and that is what we are putting our attention to.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s response to the consultation and to the concerns raised about section 40. Will he outline further its potential impact on the viability of local newspapers and press, such as the Long Eaton and District Chronicle, the Ilkeston Advertiser and Ilkeston Life in my constituency?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend mentions three of her local papers. Given the nature of section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, anybody making a complaint will see the costs assigned to the newspaper and not to the complainant if that newspaper is not a member of a royal charter-approved regulator. That means anybody making any complaint would effectively be able to stop a journalist pursuing a story, as was set out eloquently by Alastair Campbell.

The situation has changed since 2011; nobody then imagined that a self-regulator, IPSO, would come to the fore. It now covers 95% of national newspapers, has a low-cost arbitration system and can require corrections to be put in place. IPSO is not perfect, and I hope it makes further progress, but nobody imagined that it would be there at all. We have a better system than was in place, and it allows for redress and for local newspapers to thrive as much as possible.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statements because I believe that although newspapers often make the life of an elite intolerable, they make complacency impossible. I worry about local newspapers, and I welcome what he said about section 40, because we used to have three newspapers and we now have one, the Harlow Star. We also have the good newspaper internet site “Your Harlow”. What other measures will he put in place to strengthen local newspapers?

Matt Hancock: This is an important question and we are working hard on what we can do, through this review of the sustainability of the press, with which I hope my right hon. Friend, the Harlow Star and “Your Harlow” will engage, to ensure that we have not just support from the big organisations—whether that is the BBC or some of the big internet giants—but commercial models that work effectively to deliver news, locally and nationally.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I am very disappointed with the Secretary of State’s statement and feel personally let down by his answers to some of the questions. What is in this for the victims of phone hacking and press abuse? What does he say to the Dowler family, the Hillsborough families and the other countless victims of appalling press abuse? There is nothing in this. We had the promises made to them by a Conservative Prime Minister and the legislation that was voted on by the Secretary of State. Times have not changed for the victims, and there is nothing in this for them. What will he say to them?

Matt Hancock: What I have said and will say to them is that we have to make sure that the UK media and news industry can hold the powerful to account and respond to today’s challenges. That means facing the country as it is now, which includes the stronger press and positive political discussion because of the technology that is available. In that context, the proposals that were set out more than five or six years ago would make the challenges harder and worse, rather than better.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome the statement. Does my right hon. Friend agree that as the press, both local and national, has a critical role in holding politicians and the powerful to account, any form of state regulation is highly undesirable in a democratic society?
Matt Hancock: Yes, I do. To be frank, I am concerned by the statements coming out of some parts of our political system that seem to think that state control over newspapers is a good idea.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As a former journalist, I am utterly dismayed by the Secretary of State’s statement. I value the freedom of the press, but does he not see the sad irony in talking about how the press has held the powerful to account and then closing the door on our opportunity to hold the powerful voices of the press to account on behalf of the victims? Those victims were promised the sort of legislation in section 40 that the Secretary of State is now turning away from. The problems faced by local newspapers and the newspaper industry in general are nothing to do with Leveson; they are to do with modern technology. Will the Secretary of State please reconsider thinking about the victims and giving them a chance to raise legitimate concerns under section 40?

Matt Hancock: I agree with the hon. Lady. Lady that there has been a big change because of modern technology. I want to make sure that we have high-quality journalism in future and that that cannot be undermined by any complainant having costs assigned to the newspaper for any complaint. That is no way to organise a system of press regulation. Instead, we have to make sure that we have sustainable business models for high-quality journalists so that, just as the hon. Lady had the opportunity to be a journalist in the past, people have that sort of opportunity in future.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, particularly what he said about section 40. I also agree with what he said about the local press, which are the lifeblood of our communities. Is he aware that Iliffe Media Publishing Ltd has recently bought Lynn News in my constituency? It is bucking the national trend by investing in a new building and in its staff, and it is confident about the future.

Matt Hancock: I am absolutely delighted to hear that. It is not the national norm to hear that about the local press, but that shows that sustainable business models can be found. I am absolutely delighted about that and want to do everything I can to make sure that there are sustainable business models for high-quality journalism, which includes not adding extra costs on to the local press.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Rebekah Brooks and Andy Coulson came before a Committee of this House and admitted to committing crimes by bribing police officers—such was the scale of their arrogance; they felt that they were so powerful that they could take on Parliament and they had the Metropolitan police in their pockets. That shows the scale of the position we had reached when the Secretary of State voted in favour of the legislation that he is now trying to repeal. Has he forgotten what happened to the victims? Our duty is to give a voice in this House to people who are weak and vulnerable. As Members of Parliament, we have a duty to stand up for them. The Secretary of State has failed to do that today.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely powerful case for just how much the Leveson inquiry looked into everything in this area, and it was followed by three police investigations. My central point is this. We looked into these things as a society. We had a comprehensive Leveson inquiry. We spent £48 million of taxpayers’ money doing so. As he said, there were criminal convictions as a result and some people were jailed. My job now as Secretary of State is to look at what the country needs for the future.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Can the Secretary of State reassure me that the new regulatory framework is working well for victims and is much cheaper and easier than those regulations that were in force at the time of Leveson?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. I can tell the House, first, that we have a new independent self-regulator, IPSO; secondly, that it has introduced a low-cost arbitration scheme; thirdly, that it requires corrections, including multiple front-page corrections; and that we would like to see further action in strengthening it. What matters is this House in terms of having a free and robust press, whether we like every story or not—frankly, I do not like some of the stories about me, but I still want people to be able to write them—is that people have to write to hold the powerful to account. That means scrutinising this place in the robust way that the press does.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): How many of the victims’ families have called for a change of Government policy?

Matt Hancock: We have considered the evidence from right across the board. We have had 174 responses to the consultation and we will be publishing all those details in full. We have taken into account the considerations raised by the victims and the considerations raised by everybody else responding to the consultation.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): When journalists are investigating cases, it is vital that they check their facts and do not publish before they have checked their facts. What action will my right hon. Friend take to ensure that redress is available for those people who have been unfairly pilloried? Can he also explain to the House why he is not taking forward Sir Brian’s recommendation to further the investigation, albeit on amended terms?

Matt Hancock: Of course, accuracy is part of the code against which complaints are considered and, therefore, corrections and apologies can be required by an IPSO-regulated newspaper. On the first point, which is very important, accuracy is core to the redress system. It is critical that we have a regulatory system for the press. It is also critical that it is not a regulatory system that is put in place by politicians, but one that is put in place by the press itself.
bring pressure on you. That was for a Member of Parliament. Please think, in your liberal democracy, Minister, about what it means for an ordinary person—one of our constituents—to be taken on by something like the Daily Mail—their life traduced and their family ruined, with so little ability to stand up for themselves and their family. Will he think again on this? As far as I can see, if he reads the Daily Mail this week, he will see that not much has happened to change it.

Matt Hancock: The libel laws are of course a critical guardian in this space, but the low-cost arbitration scheme brought in by IPSO is designed precisely to address that question, and making sure that that works is very important.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I agree with the Minister about section 40 because I have seen the impact that that would have on local papers such as the New Shopper in my constituency. However, I do not agree with some of the personalised attacks upon him. May I bring him back to the second part of the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about the amended terms of Leveson? Sir Brian Leveson is probably the most distinguished and experienced judge in criminal matters in this country. He identified in detail the issue of criminal collusion between corrupt police officers and corrupt journalists. Anyone who knows the criminal justice system knows that that has not gone away and continues. Absent of Leveson 2 on revised terms, what will the Government do to expose and deal with that?

Matt Hancock: Of course there have been changes to policing—not least the code of ethics, the national guidance for police officers and the changes in the Policing and Crime Act 2017. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that I did not address the second part of his question. We are taking forward the need to look at and to ensure that this country has high-quality journalism, but we have to look at that in the full round. Yes, that includes the press, but it also includes online, where a huge amount of news is now consumed. I am happy to talk to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) about what he thinks needs to be done, but I want to ensure that we address the problems that we still face.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Democratic Unionist party is listening, but we remain concerned that Northern Ireland newsrooms and papers seem to have got off scot-free in the first inquiry. Will the Secretary of State tell us just how the landscape has changed since Sir Brian initiated the report? In the light of our concerns, where does he think we are now?

Matt Hancock: There has been a change, not only in the wider media landscape that we have discussed, but in the means of redress available. Self-regulation is much tougher, with the introduction of IPSO and the ability for people to go to arbitration. We now have the means of redress to address problems in the press, and I hope that they will be strengthened.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): While we are right to celebrate a free press within our democracy, are we not also right to demand a responsible press? With freedom comes responsibility. On the subject of responsibility, may I invite the Secretary of State to share his thoughts as to whether, in order to ensure a free and open democracy, the responsible thing to do would be for Members to hand back racially tainted money?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend’s second point raises a very important question. I am sure the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) will be thinking very hard about that now that he has admitted that it was a mistake to take this money. On my hon. Friend’s first point, it is critical that the press and online publications act responsibly and accurately in their reporting.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State agree to meet the Dowler family, Christopher Jeffries and the McCanns to explain to them why this Conservative Government are breaking the promise given by a Conservative Prime Minister?

Matt Hancock: As I said, I have already met some of the victims. I have also already extended an invitation to meet victims and Hacked Off in order to discuss today’s statement and what we are doing.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): In my 15 years at The Daily Telegraph, I had a thankfully limited amount to do with the Press Complaints Commission. I reassure the Secretary of State that IPSO is genuinely a profoundly different regulator with far greater powers and far more teeth. Section 40 would have a chilling effect not just on our valued local papers, but on our national papers. The issue that faces local papers today is social media and the changes in technology that I saw the beginnings of over those 15 years. May I say that what the Secretary of State has done today has done more for the freedom of the press in this country and our accountability than the alternative course of action that the Opposition would like to see?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend speaks with great authority on this matter because not only was he a journalist, but he was a journalist of technology, so he understands the impact of technology on journalism in a very personal way. I agree entirely with what he said on the importance of having a press that can report without fear or favour, and that can hold the powerful to account. We sometimes talk in a glib way about holding the powerful to account, but accountability is critical to good decision making. It is only when we have full accountability for our decisions that our feet are held to the fire and we think extremely hard about all the different courses of action available to us.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Sir Brian believes that the inquiry should continue, albeit in a different form. The victims, who were promised as much in person by David Cameron, believed that the inquiry would continue. Those victims have been betrayed today. Will the Secretary of State enlighten us—when was the last time that a Government overruled the wishes of a judge chairing an inquiry?
Matt Hancock: I do not know the answer to the last point, because I am only looking at this inquiry. What I have to do, and what I have done today, is make a judgment about what the national interest is. I entirely understand the concerns of the victims in this issue. As we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, there have been significant changes. The inquiry was a significant undertaking that led to a year-long look at all these issues and the concerns of the victims, and then there were three police investigations and over 40 convictions. It is not as if this has not been looked into—it has been looked into to the tune of 48 million quid. I therefore have to take the decision today on what is in the national interest of the country as a whole, and that is exactly what I have done.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I welcome the statement on section 40, which would jeopardise the viability of fantastic local papers such as Barrhead News in my constituency. I also associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara). Can the Secretary of State confirm my understanding that Labour’s proposal to enact section 40 now would have serious implications for the relationship between Scotland’s two Governments in a devolved area?

Matt Hancock: Yes. The amendments that will come before the House in coming months would have very complicated impacts on the devolution settlement that I do not want to go into. I am very happy with the devolution settlement in this area. It is a good settlement, and I look forward to trying to ensure that it is maintained through the passage of the Bill.

Simon Hoare: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the point of order now because I think that it appertains to current exchanges.

Simon Hoare: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I appreciate that passions run high in this debate, but the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), probably inadvertently, accused Government Members—certainly Ministers, I believe—of taking the Murdoch shilling. That is quite a serious allegation of bribery and corruption, I would suggest. May I ask for your guidance on whether it is in order and how the hon. Gentleman might correct it?

Mr Speaker: A number of interventions are made from a sedentary position that are not always heard by everybody, but if the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) heard that said, and if it was said, the short answer is that it is not in order. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) can respond.

Chris Bryant: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am obviously absolutely happy to make it clear that I make no insinuation about bribery or corruption of any hon. Member of this House. All hon. Members are honourable Members. I also bear in mind that when we prayed earlier this morning we said that we should always speak without fear or favour. I am absolutely sure that that is what we would all want to do.

Mr Speaker: I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman has said. I think he did err in the heat of the moment, but I accept what he said, and its spirit, and I am sure that the Secretary of State does too. I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Dorset, who I trust will be content to leave the matter there.
Business of the House

11.28 am

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 5 MARCH—Second Reading of the Data Protection Bill [Lords].

TUESDAY 6 MARCH—Second Reading of the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 7 MARCH—Opposition day (un-allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of Plaid Cymru followed by a debate on a motion in the name of the Democratic Unionist Party. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 8 MARCH—General debate on Vote 100 and International Women’s Day.

FRIDAY 9 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The business for the week commencing 12 March will include:

MONDAY 12 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill [Lords].

May I wish all Members dydd gyrfyl Dewi Sant hapus? I am told that that is “Happy St David’s day”, for all the non-Welsh speakers among us. I think that is right, but someone will no doubt put me right if it is not. This House has some great and talented Welsh MPs, and I wish them all a very happy St David’s day.

I can see plenty of daffodil pins in the Chamber, which today represent not only St David’s day but Marie Curie’s great daffodil appeal. As Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month begins, we are all incredibly grateful for the work of palliative care nurses, who do so much to support people suffering from such dreadful diseases.

Our knowledge of the symptoms of ovarian cancer has improved over recent years, but we have a long way to go to improve early diagnosis, and this awareness month will support that.

Lastly, today is World Book Day. Much like in “The Chronicles of Narnia”, Members will be aware that today is very much winter outside but not Christmas. From “Alice in Wonderland” and “Little Women” to “The Tiger Who Came to Tea”, long may we all share our love of reading and continue to encourage children of all ages to share their pleasures in a good book.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I am really worried about parliamentary sovereignty. I note that the Leader of the House has not announced business beyond 12 March, but let me help her and the Government. I understand that the spring statement will be on 13 March, which was announced by the Treasury in a fancy infographic. I am sorry that the Leader of the House could not even announce the spring statement.

There was also no announcement of whether the Prime Minister is coming to the House to make a statement after her very important speech on Brexit. She chooses to make her speech in another location and not here, to us. Can the Leader of the House confirm that the Prime Minister will make a statement here? Can she confirm whether the speech will be in Aberdeen or somewhere else?

I see the Government may have a new policy, called “pure illusion”—it sounds like a new perfume or a paint shade. European Council President Donald Tusk knows about it, and that is even before we have debated it.

While we welcome him to the UK, I am sure he will want to remind the Government again that it is cherry blossom time coming up, not cherry-picking time. What about the U-turn on transition rights that was whispered about yesterday? Is someone—anyone—coming to the House to explain it, so that we can ask questions about it?

A written statement was made yesterday by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on behalf of the House of Commons Commission about restoration and renewal. He said that the sponsor body and the delivery authority need primary legislation to be introduced. Can the Leader of the House say when that legislation is likely to come before the House? Will it be next year, the year after or the year after that?

Last week, I raised two statutory instruments that had been prayed against on the eligibility for free school meals of those on universal credit and abolishing nursing bursaries for postgraduate nursing students. We are now rapidly eating into the 40 days. Could the Leader of the House make time for those to be debated? The shadow Education Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), has prayed against three more statutory instruments: No. 120 and No. 146 on childcare vouchers, and the School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2018, on the national funding formula.

What about our next Opposition day? We have not had sight of that, and no one seems to be talking to us about when we are likely to have it. What are the Government scared of? It is the same with the Report stage of the Trade Bill and the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill. I know that Members are so keen to debate new clause 5, because the country wants to know what the position is on their jobs and living standards. There goes the sovereignty of Parliament, tossed aside again.

The same day that Ministers were at Chequers, the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) said:

“Discipline has completely broken down in the parliamentary party, so no one tells anyone off;”—that may be a surprise to some Members at the back—“because there’s no power anywhere.”

When the Conservative party does have power, it does not want to use it against money launderers. In a point of order yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) asked for guidance on the handling of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill in Committee. The Programming Subcommittee decided that it wanted clause 1 to be taken after clause 18, but when the Committee got to clause 18, debate was stopped immediately, after 25 minutes. Could the Leader of the House ensure that there will be adequate time to debate the 40 amendments and clause 1, which is the Magnitsky clause and will strengthen our sanctions regime?

Private Members’ Bills are now backing up. The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), the Stalking Protection Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), and the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) are all supported by the Government but have not been given a date for Committee stage.
Today the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse—a very important matter—publishes its first report on reported child abuse. Thousands of British children were deported by their own Government to the other side of the world and they suffered horrific sexual abuse. The inquiry will not hold a press conference on its findings, but it will publish the significant report online, and there is a written statement today. Given the scale and significance of this injustice, and the hurt suffered by so many, will the Government commit to making time for a statement at the earliest opportunity?

At Prime Minister’s questions last week, the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who voted to cut police budgets—the west midlands has had to face a cut of £145 million since 2010—said that £10 million was being spent on “back-office staff”. The West Midlands police and crime commissioner has confirmed to me that the staff are in fact police support staff and are upset at the use of that pejorative term. They answer emergency 999 calls, investigate child abuse cases and carry out forensics. I hope that the Leader of the House will ensure that an appropriate apology will be made by the hon. Gentleman and perhaps schedule a debate on what police support staff actually do.

We welcome back the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire). He and the Prime Minister both agreed that early referral to a tertiary consultant was extremely important to save lives. The shadow Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), made a point of order yesterday requesting an urgent statement on why clinical commissioning groups are paying GPs not to make referrals. The Health Secretary needs to explain that policy and stop that alarming practice immediately.

I join the Leader of the House in saying that this is the 21st World Book Day. Walsall South has lost three libraries. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) will host the World Book Day celebrations in the Attlee suite between 10 am and 3 pm, when we can all go and read a book or recite a poem.

I, too, want to try my Welsh—I apologise to every Welsh person here—and say dydd gynt Dewi San.

Happy St David’s day.

Andrea Leadsom: Excellent! I am glad that the hon. Lady and I are both determined to practise our Welsh today. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who is sitting next to me, is a Welsh speaker and says that we both did okay. I thank him for that.

The hon. Lady mentioned parliamentary sovereignty. I say genuinely that, as Leader of the House of Commons, I have always made it clear I am absolutely, fully respectful of the sovereignty of Parliament. My role is that of Government spokesman here in the Chamber and of Parliament spokesman in Government. I always take very seriously the questions asked and requests made by the hon. Lady on behalf of Opposition parties. I must say to her, however, that it has been made very clear that there will be one Budget statement and one spring statement a year, so the upcoming statement is a statement, not a Budget or a debate. Statements are announced in the usual way, not during a business statement on the future business of the House. Likewise, she asked whether the Prime Minister would make a statement, but such business measures are announced in the usual way.

The hon. Lady asked about an Opposition day. I have just announced Opposition day debates for Plaid and the Democratic Unionist party. Is she really saying that their opportunity to debate matters that are of interest to them is not valid? She needs to recognise that there are many different aspects to this Chamber, all of which are valid, and we want to share out with fairness the opportunity to suggest new measures.

The hon. Lady asked about the customs Bill. As with the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, the Human Rights Act and many constitutional Bills in the past, there can be periods of time between Second Reading and Committee stage and between Committee and Report. She will recognise that such periods are not delays, but opportunities to consider amendments, Government policy and improving legislation. The hon. Lady is just wrong to portray this as a delay, and each of those Bills will come forward in good time. Given my role in seeing through legislation, I am committed to ensuring that all our Brexit legislation comes through in good time.

The hon. Lady mentioned the point of order that was raised by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). As the Minister for Europe and the Americas said in Committee, a motion was brought forward for the Committee to adjourn so that it could debate a significant amendment in a full session. That Committee meeting started 10 minutes ago, and they are indeed discussing that detailed amendment right now. I hope that the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) is reassured by that.

A number of private Members’ Bills have been promoted by Opposition and Government Members. We are delighted to support them and there are no delays. They are not stacking up; they are going through their Committee stages when they receive the support of the House in the usual way. I am afraid I just do not accept the hon. Lady’s concerns about parliamentary sovereignty. We are listening, and we continue to bring forward all legislation and consideration of Opposition days in the usual way.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the removal of diesel particulate filters from vehicles without replacing them? It appears there is a legal loophole whereby vehicles can be modified to improve their performance, with absolutely no regard for the damage done to people’s health.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. The impact of diesel particulates on air quality and people’s health is a crucial issue, and we are determined to improve air quality. The Department for Transport takes my hon. Friend’s point seriously, and has published guidance on modifying a vehicle’s emissions system. Modifying a vehicle in the way suggested is not in line with current legislation, and the Department has recently instructed officials to investigate the creation of a specific offence for the removal of particulate filters.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week’s business. Here is my go: dydd gynt Dewi Sant
haps—I hope I have impressed the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) with that. I also note all the daffodils in the Chamber today. Looking outside, I think that is more in hope than experience as we face one of the worst snow storms that we have had for a number of years.

There are only two real items of business this week: the “beast from the east”, and the Foreign Secretary. One is a whiteout, delivering havoc and chaos wherever it goes and whatever it touches, and the other is the “beast from the east”. To help out the Foreign Secretary, perhaps we could have a debate about congestion charges, and we could gently explain to him how congestion charge zones are just a little bit different from international borders. It is now 24 hours since the Foreign Secretary said that he would publish his letter on an Irish hard border, so when can we expect to see it? Surely the Foreign Office One should be liberated, and allowed to continue to confound and baffle the country.

We now have red or amber warnings over nearly all of Scotland and large swathes of the rest of the UK, and the advice is not to travel—hence SNP Members are here in such numbers this morning. However, I am quite surprised that there are no plans for a Government statement as the nation grinds to a partial halt, particularly when National Grid has issued a “gas deficit warning” over fears that supplies could run out. Before we all leave for the day—well, at least some of us—will someone from the Government make a statement in the House about what provisions and contingency plans are in place, particularly if we experience difficulties over the weekend?

Finally, we are facing an increasing constitutional cliff edge as our devolution settlement remains under threat. Can we have a statement on what progress is being made in resolving those issues? Critically, what is being done to ensure that democracy is respected in every nation of this United Kingdom?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has clarified that so many of his hon. Friends are in the Chamber today because of inclement weather, because I thought they were here to wind me up about the Calcutta cup. What I would like to say through gritted teeth is that I have not seen Scotland play so well since the Hastings brothers, which is a very long time ago. Scotland played superbly. I am delighted that Scotland is, in part, a member of the home team, being part of the great United Kingdom. I would much rather see Scotland beat us than France, if I am allowed to say that in this place, Mr Speaker.

On the hon. Gentleman’s thoughts about Boris, I have a different perspective. I think he often says things as they are, and he says things in an amusing way. He makes a very good point that it is absolutely clear that we will not have a hard border in Northern Ireland. That is absolutely the case. We are committed to that, the Republic of Ireland is committed to that and the European Union is committed to that.

The hon. Gentleman talks about contingency plans for severe weather. This is a very serious issue on which I hope I can reassure him. I know a number of hon. Members raised it in Transport questions earlier. The Department for Transport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, schools and the NHS all have very carefully laid severe weather plans. I pay tribute to all those who are out there in this terrible weather trying to dig people out of snowdrifts and so on, and those in the NHS who are dealing with people who have slipped on the ice and so on. There are very good plans, which are available. If he has specific issues about his constituency, or the constituencies of any of his hon. Friends, I am very happy to raise them on his behalf, or he can raise them directly with Ministers.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): May we have a statement on the actions of the West Essex clinical commissioning group? Osler House GP surgery in my constituency has been closed with little warning or consultation with me or other stakeholders, causing misery for nearly 3,000 patients, many of them elderly. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Health Minister to write to West Essex CCG to get it to restore this vital service to residents?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a point that is incredibly important to all of us. The issue of GP surgeries in our constituencies is vital. Having looked into this matter, I am told that the Department of Health and Social Care does not have a record of my right hon. Friend’s letter. It apologises if that is due to any error on its part and it will certainly be writing to him. We recognise the importance of primary care. We are investing in it to expand access and recruit an additional 5,000 GPs. As he knows, we would expect consultation and engagement if NHS England or a CCG were to decide on changes that involved a substantial service reconfiguration.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The “beast from the east” has claimed a number of victims—there are currently no trains crossing the border, on either the east coast main line or the west coast main line, to Scotland—and I am afraid to say that when the “beast from the east” meets “stormageddon Emma” there will be further victims. One of those victims is the business of the House. At the request of Welsh Members, the scheduled St David’s Day debate on Welsh affairs for this afternoon has been cancelled so that they can travel home safely. I apologise to right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, but I think it is understandable given the conditions across the country.

Currently, the Backbench Business Committee has only six members—we are two down from the Government side. Given that the Committee has a quorum of four, that makes life extremely difficult for us. May I therefore ask that the Government appoint their replacement members as soon as possible, so that the Committee can carry on operating?

Finally, I thank and congratulate staff from my own local authority, Gateshead Council. Bin collections were curtailed yesterday as all staff were out gritting and snow ploughing across the whole borough in really adverse conditions. I put on record my thanks to all of them.

Andrea Leadsom: First of all, I am sorry to hear that this afternoon’s business will be disturbed. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), is slightly devastated because this was his chance to shine. The cancellation of the
debate is completely understandable, as the situation is very difficult for people who have travel arrangements. I join the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) in congratulating all the people out there gritting and trying to clear away snow. Quite a number of schoolchildren are also out in villages and other communities, clearing people’s steps for them. That is a fantastic thing to see. I will take on board his point about replacing the Government members of his Backbench Business Committee. I will certainly see that we act on it.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Could we have a debate on the non-levy apprenticeship tender? Unfortunately, some very good colleges, such as Stafford, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Shrewsbury and others across the country, were not successful in the tender, and I have some grave concerns about the operation of it.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sorry to hear that, and I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise those specific points directly with Ministers.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Shw’mae, Mr Speaker—I am not Welsh, but I have two children born in Wales, and so happy St David’s Day, and may I congratulate the Leader of the House in passing on mentioning cancer charities today? I will be walking in the Marsden March on Sunday, snow permitting, raising money for the Royal Marsden cancer hospital.

Could we have a statement on how we treat visitors to this House? We are in danger of getting to the stage where wealthy, well-connected people can come here without a Member and book rooms and tables in our restaurants. Yesterday, I had a large party who struggled to come here and another for wealthy people, we should look at this very seriously.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman that game is delicious, very good for you and just as cheap. I encourage him to raise that at Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions on Thursday 8 March, when he can ask Ministers there exactly what we are doing to expand the retail use.

Some lengths have been gone to to ensure that people’s ease of access to this place is as good as it can be. On the specific point about what they were wearing, I was not aware of that, so if he wants to write to me, I will look into it.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Last Monday, the Government approved the go-ahead for Christchurch Council to be amalgamated with other Dorset councils. There was a referendum. I am not getting that in my constituency, which wants a referendum to decide the future of its council. We are being ignored. Democracy is being ignored. Could we please have a debate in this place on the protection of democracy in local councils?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue about local democracy. I am not aware of the specific concern that he has about his local council, but I am sure that if he wanted to take it up with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers, they would be able to address it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Country sports and shooting sports produce game worth £114 million in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland each year. The nourishment and taste value of it is substantial. There is a need to introduce it to a wider circle and customer base. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on this issue and on how best to deliver good food that is every bit as good as chicken, and every bit as cheap?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Friend raises an important concern that he has about his local council, but I am not getting that in my constituency, which wants a go-ahead for Christchurch Council to be amalgamated with other Dorset councils. There was a referendum. I am not getting that in my constituency, which wants a referendum to decide the future of its council. We are being ignored. Democracy is being ignored. Could we please have a debate in this place on the protection of democracy in local councils?

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Very shortly, the Government will hopefully be announcing the recipients of money from the northern cultural regeneration fund. Perhaps the Leader of the House might find time for a debate on this subject so that we can all, I hope, explain why the Odeon in Bradford would be such a worthy recipient of that funding, which would do a massive amount to regenerate the city of Bradford. If she cannot find time for a debate, perhaps she will shorten the approach and go and tell the relevant Minister just to give the money to the Odeon in Bradford, and let us be done with it.

Andrea Leadsom: If only I had such influence! My hon. Friend is a great champion for his area, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can make his pitch directly.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The President of the European Council said in a speech this morning that the red lines that the Government have set themselves on Europe are incompatible with frictionless trade and a borderless Ireland. May we have an urgent debate—a debate that we have not yet had—on the consequences of the Government’s red lines for Brexit negotiations?
Adjournment debate on the issue.

I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on the issue.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Last week saw yet another abuse of leaseholders in my constituency, this time in Coleshill, where some one-bedroom flat owners received bills for up to £8,000 a year in ground rent. May we have a statement on how the important Government work on leases with short review periods and doubling clauses is progressing?

Andrea Leadsom: I met the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government this week to discuss that subject, in my role in connection with policy. My hon. Friend has raised a very serious matter. Abuses of this sort need to be stopped, and we are committed to stopping them through our programme of leasehold reforms. That means, for example, legislating to prevent the sale of new-build leasehold houses except when necessary, making certain that ground rents on new long leases for both houses and flats are set at zero financial value, working with the Law Commission to support existing leaseholders, and making the process of purchasing a freehold or extending a lease much easier and cheaper.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I hope that the House will indulge me if I tell a personal story. Last year I received a court warrant at my home in Scotland. It turned out that an Alan Brown in London, with a London address, had skipped a bus fare and been caught by an inspector. That Alan Brown did not respond to any correspondence, so an additional warrant on my property was issued. Last week, however, I received another notification of a warrant on my property, and it had cancelled them. May we have a statement on how the English court system and Transport for London are using private companies whose sole objective is to make it easier and cheaper.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I can tell the hon. Gentleman that good lawyers are always available, even at short notice.

So far, much of the debate about the European Commission’s draft withdrawal agreement has centred on its effect on Northern Ireland, but hidden away in one of the footnotes is, regrettably, a restatement that Spain would have a veto on the application of either a transitional or a final agreement to the overseas British territory of Gibraltar. May we have an early, perhaps even an immediate, statement from the Leader of the House that Her Majesty’s Government’s position remains that such a scenario is wholly unacceptable, and that Britain will in no circumstances agree to any arrangement that prevents Gibraltar from being treated in exactly the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope I can give my hon. Friend the assurance from the Dispatch Box that Gibraltar’s interests will be protected, as will every other part of the UK and our dependencies. He raises an important point, and we will be aware that the Prime Minister is making a key speech tomorrow, and I will certainly make sure that I pass on his comments.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Although the second debate has been withdrawn, there is a well-subscribed first debate and I am keen that we progress expeditiously. Questions are quite long and it would be good if they could be shorter.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I start by saying how pleased I was that the Leader of the House mentioned the Eve Appeal and the fact that this is the month of ovarian cancer awareness, as it is important that we mark and remember that?

There is a broad consensus that faster connectivity between east and west is vital for the northern powerhouse. However, in May we will have a revised TransPennine timetable which will result in slower journeys from Hull. Hull and Humber chamber of commerce has tried to meet with TransPennine to discuss this, but has not been able to get very far. I am sure the Leader of the House agrees that it is important that that meeting goes ahead, but may we have a debate in the House of Commons about the fact that not just north-south connectivity but east-west connectivity is important?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady that east-west connectivity is vital. I hope she was able to attend Transport questions, because this would be a question very directly answerable by Transport Ministers. We are delivering unprecedented investment in better transport across the north—over £13 billion, which is the largest amount in Government history—but I encourage the hon. Lady to take up the specific point she raises directly with Transport Ministers.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Next week is national apprenticeships week. May we have a debate to highlight the opportunities available for people starting an apprenticeship? The best advocates for apprenticeships are apprentices, but if we have a debate Members could have a go and do our best to fill the gap.
Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that apprenticeships are a fantastic opportunity for young people. In my seven years as an MP I have had seven apprentices from schools in my constituency, and I thoroughly recommend that to all Members; that has been brilliant for me and for those individuals, and it is a very worthwhile experience. We now have more than 3 million apprenticeship starts since 2010. The Government are committed to apprenticeships as a very good choice for young people, and I encourage my hon. Friend to seek a Backbench Business Committee debate on the subject, as I am sure many hon. Members would agree that that is not acceptable?

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Given that employment law is reserved to this place, may we have a statement or a debate on employers forcing their employees to remain at, or come into, work when there is a red weather warning? There are many reports in Scotland of employers refusing to release staff when public transport is not available; does the right hon. Lady agree that that is not acceptable?

Andrea Leadsom: Clearly all employers, in both the public and private sectors, should take very careful heed of severe weather warnings, and particularly the red warnings we have seen across some parts of the United Kingdom, so I encourage the hon. Gentleman to urge employers in his constituency to listen to those warnings and release people where necessary.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It was recently reported in the local press in the Scottish borders that a Transport Scotland study had found that it was not going to be viable for the borders railways to extend to Hawick and on to Carlisle. Is that the case, it will be bad news for my constituency and those in Cumbria. Given that bringing the railway to Carlisle will involve investment from the UK Government, may we have a debate on the benefits of extending the borders railway to Carlisle?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency, and I can say to him that the UK Government are committed to working with the Scottish Government to drive forward the cross-border borderlands deal, and we hope to agree a deal later this year which will see significant investment to transform the local economies in the borderlands area. Funding for a study into reopening the line he mentions is being sought as part of this proposition.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): It has been one hell of a week, Mr Speaker, particularly for my little sister. A week last Saturday, my sister broke her neck. She was in the Royal Blackburn Hospital for three days until there was a bed free for her at the Royal Preston Hospital where they could operate. Thankfully, the operation went well and my sister and all of my family are so grateful to all the hard-working doctors, nurses and staff in the NHS, but one thing I noticed was all the extra hours before and after their shifts that the doctors and nurses were doing. May we have a debate on the extra hours done by our public sector workers?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I wish the hon. Lady's sister the very best for a speedy recovery. That must have been a real shock to all her family, and we all pass on our best wishes. I am enormously grateful to and have great respect for all those who work so hard in the national health service. What they achieve is amazing, as is the commitment shown by all workers in the NHS. We have many opportunities to debate the NHS in this Chamber; we have held many such debates. There are nearly 15,000 more doctors and more than 14,000 more nurses on our wards than there were in 2010. There is much more to do; we are undertaking one of the biggest training programmes ever in our history in the NHS to start training more doctors and nurses. We want to alleviate some of the pressures, but I pay tribute to them for all the excellent work they do.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Today is Purim, the commemoration and celebration of the delivery of the Jewish people from the evil Persian king, Haman. It is also Holi, the first day of spring, celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists worldwide. Both festivals commemorate the triumph of good over evil, so will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing everyone happy Purim and Holi hai?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising both of those celebrations and I am delighted to join him in congratulating all those celebrating. I wish them a very happy time.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Dydd gydalar Dewi Sant hapus, Mr Speaker—happy St David’s day. Llongyfarchiadau, congratulations, to the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and the SNP spokesperson for using the Welsh language, which, historically, we were allowed to use recently in the Welsh Grand Committee of this House. I was pleased to make a speech in the Welsh language. Has the Leader of the House considered whether that welcome move could be extended into the Chamber now that technology makes it perfectly possible to have a freewheeling House of Commons-style debate using translation equipment?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting suggestion and I am happy to discuss it with him further.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I have had constituents contact me overnight who are very concerned about the fact that Northamptonshire County Council seems to be closing Thrapston and Raunds libraries on all but one day a week. That has happened without any consultation with the public and I am surprised, because it is in this year’s budget and not the one for the year ahead, which has been so talked about in the media. May we have an urgent statement on this, because people in Northamptonshire are very concerned about what has happened?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue that is very important to both his constituency and mine. There are seven Members of Parliament in Northamptonshire who are concerned about cuts to services. I was not aware of the closures he mentions, but I am happy to take that up directly with Ministers on his behalf.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Three weeks today will mark the sad anniversary of the tragic attack on Westminster, which saw five people killed on Westminster Bridge and the death of PC Keith Palmer.
[Matt Western]

Will the Leader of the House give the House an idea of what plans there are to mark that occasion? I would also be grateful if she could support my early-day motion 938, which calls for Carriage Gates in New Palace Yard to be renamed the Palmer Gates.

[That this House believes that the Carriage Gates should be named the Palmer Gates, to commemorate the life and professional service of PC Keith Palmer and to mark his gallantry and ultimate sacrifice in putting his life before those he courageously sought to defend; acknowledges its profound gratitude to PC Keith Palmer and to all members of the police and security services who place themselves in the defence of the public and of democracy; and calls on the House of Commons Commission to consider commemorating the naming of the gates on 22 March 2018.]

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise the upcoming anniversary of those awful events on 22 March. There will be commemorations in this place and House staff are looking into the detail of that at the moment. Announcements will be made as soon as possible. As for his specific point about renaming Carriage Gates, he might like to write to me or possibly to you, Mr Speaker, to look into this further.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I welcome the Leader of the House’s comments on the Calcutta cup. I thoroughly enjoyed my day and I would like to draw the House’s attention to early-day motion 978, which celebrates Scotland’s historic success in that event.

[That this House congratulates the Scotland Rugby team on an historic 25-13 Calcutta Cup victory over England that was full of flair, fight and finesse; recognises the fantastic work done by Gregor Townsend and his entire coaching staff; commends captain John Barclay and his entire pack for the huge effort in dominating the breakdown and a solid set piece performance, with special mention to Johnny Gray for his 20 tackles; applauds Finn Russell as he stood up to his recent critics with a magnificent man of the match performance, including the pass of this, or any other; six Nations Championship, further commends Huw Jones for his two try display, his ninth and tenth in only 14 caps; notes that this victory was celebrated right across Scotland and beyond; and wishes Gregor, John and the boys all the very best for the rest of the Championship.]

Yesterday was rare diseases day, which highlighted the importance of research to find a cure for rare diseases, of which there are up to 7,000. I have been working with the Scottish Huntington’s Association on the difficulties of obtaining insurance, and with my constituent, Michael Conway, who was diagnosed with adrenoleukodystrophy in 2016. May we have a debate to mark rare diseases day and the importance of sustaining research collaboration, particularly after Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the importance of continued investment in research into rare diseases. I am sure that part of the frustration felt by those who suffer from them is due to the lack of funding, precisely because the diseases are rare. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment or Back-Bench debate on this subject. I would also like to say that, while I congratulate Scotland on winning the Calcutta cup, I do so through gritted teeth.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Twenty years ago, building on the work done by John Major, Tony Blair’s Labour Government were involved in intensive negotiations in Castle Buildings in Belfast. I was there as a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Northern Ireland Office. Those negotiations led to the Good Friday agreement. The anniversary of the Good Friday agreement is unfortunately during the recess, so may we have a long debate before the House rises for Easter in which we can discuss the implications of the threat to the Good Friday agreement from the “Wrexit” coalition—between the Democratic Unionist party, whose members were demonstrating outside when the agreement was reached, and the European Research Group—which is now running this country?

Andrea Leadsom: I can completely assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are fully committed to the Good Friday agreement, and that nothing is in any way being considered that would do damage to that agreement. However, I say gently to those who try to suggest that the Government are in some way not committed to it simply because we are leaving the EU that that is entirely untrue and exceedingly dangerous talk.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am sure the Leader of the House will agree that it is time we were given an opportunity to debate our industrial shipping heritage. In my constituency, we are still aggrieved that great icons such as the Queen Mary, the Cutty Sark and even the royal yacht Britannia are not at home in port in West Dunbartonshire, and that it is up to volunteers such as the Maid of the Loch Trust, which is rebuilding the Maid of the Loch at Loch Lomond, to ensure that that part of our industrial shipping heritage will once again set sail on the bonnie loch. I am sure the Minister will agree that it is time we debated that, and that she will congratulate the trust on its work.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned some very famous ships, and I join him in congratulating the trust on its work on that fine heritage in his constituency. I encourage him to seek a Backbench debate in which all those with shipping interests in their constituencies can come together to celebrate that proud heritage.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): In the light of the figures that many Members have received today from the Fire Brigades Union, may we have an urgent debate on the funding of the fire service, which has lost hundreds of millions of pounds of grant? In my constituency in Nottinghamshire, the fire service will lose 15% of its grant—some £2.8 million—over the next few years. That is unacceptable; it is not good enough, and we need to have a debate about it.

Andrea Leadsom: The fire brigades do a fantastic job. We have heard about some horrendous fires in recent months, as well as the appalling Grenfell disaster, in which the fire brigades really came into their own and did an incredible job for us, for which we are very grateful. However, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that, thankfully, the number of fires is decreasing, and the role of fire officers is therefore changing and adapting. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can talk about the specific issues in his constituency,
but overall, the fire brigades deserve our respect and our gratitude, as well as a recognition that their role is changing.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, the Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust decided to set up a subsidiary company, and that was confirmed today. I appreciate the fact that there will be a half-hour debate on this subject next Tuesday, and I am sure that the Leader of the House will consider raising the decision by some trusts to bring together different aspects of care in order to give a better service to patients. We should all embrace the possibility of better wraparound care, but if he has specific concerns, he should raise them at the debate next week.

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, there is a debate on that subject next Tuesday, and I am sure that he will want to take this matter up at that time. I think that he is referring to the decision made by some trusts to bring together different aspects of care in order to give a better service to patients. We should all embrace the possibility of better wraparound care, but if he has specific concerns, he should raise them at the debate next week.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I am sure that we all want to pay tribute to the public sector workers who have struggled into work in this severe weather to keep vital services running, but may we have a statement on our preparedness for this weather? In all the years that I have been alive, we have had winter. We also have severe episodes of winter, but we seem to fall over quite easily when that happens. Countries that have this sort of weather on a regular basis seem to cope with it. May we have a statement on our resilience, so that we can learn lessons from what has happened this year, in the hope that we can get our trains running a bit better so that people are not left waiting at cold stations with no information about what is going on?

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, there is a debate on that subject next Tuesday, and I am sure that he will want to take this matter up at that time. I think that he is referring to the decision made by some trusts to bring together different aspects of care in order to give a better service to patients. We should all embrace the possibility of better wraparound care, but if he has specific concerns, he should raise them at the debate next week.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate on that subject next Tuesday, and I am sure that he will want to take this matter up at that time. I think that he is referring to the decision made by some trusts to bring together different aspects of care in order to give a better service to patients. We should all embrace the possibility of better wraparound care, but if he has specific concerns, he should raise them at the debate next week.

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Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Obviously, we want to minimise disruption, and it is frustrating for people when trains are cancelled and schools are closed, for example. Equally, we will recognise that there are some exceptional weather events going on at the moment. Whitehall Departments have clear plans for dealing with disruptive weather, and we heard at Transport questions today about some of the excellent operations to dig people out of snowdrifts and to ensure that the trains can run. At the same time, there are always lessons to be learned from these events, and I am sure that the Whitehall Departments will be looking at what we can do better.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, the Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust decided to set up a subsidiary company, and that was confirmed today. I appreciate the fact that there will be a half-hour debate on this subject next Tuesday, and I am sure that the Leader of the House will consider raising the decision by some trusts to bring together different aspects of care in order to give a better service to patients. We should all embrace the possibility of better wraparound care, but if he has specific concerns, he should raise them at the debate next week.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I am sure that we all want to pay tribute to the public sector workers who have struggled into work in this severe weather to keep vital services running, but may we have a statement on our preparedness for this weather? In all the years that I have been alive, we have had winter. We also have severe episodes of winter, but we seem to fall over quite easily when that happens. Countries that have this sort of weather on a regular basis seem to cope with it. May we have a statement on our resilience, so that we can learn lessons from what has happened this year, in the hope that we can get our trains running a bit better so that people are not left waiting at cold stations with no information about what is going on?

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Patrick Grady: Progress so that they can get back to teaching their students, so what pressure will the Government bring to bear to ensure that lecturers’ pensions are protected?

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Gentleman will know, it is for universities to resolve this crisis, and Ministers are working hard to try to ensure that all sides come to the table. I have to say that it is extremely difficult for the students. My eldest child, who is graduating this year, is feeling the brunt of this, with no lecturers, no input, no tuition and no face time. The students, who have done nothing wrong and who have paid for their education, are faced with no input at what for many is a crucial time. I urge lecturers not to punish students for this dispute.

International Court of Justice

SELECT COMMITTEE STATEMENT

Mr Speaker: Ian Murray will speak on this subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, the occupant of the Chair will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and will call him to respond to these in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning. I call Ian Murray to make the statement on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

12.21 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to make this statement, on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Committee, on our fourth report, which is on the International Court of Justice. Our Chair, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), and other members of the Committee are in Birmingham today and send their apologies for not being present—given that the Committee travels to some of the most challenging places in the world, little did they think that Birmingham would be the most challenging yet, considering the difficulties in getting there and back today.

In November last year the UK Government were unable to secure the re-election of the UK judge, Sir Christopher Greenwood, to the UN International Court of Justice. As a result, the UK is not represented on the ICJ for the first time since the Court’s creation in 1945. Sir Christopher was first elected to the ICJ in 2009 but, despite his impeccable record and what the Foreign and Commonwealth Office told us was a long and extensive lobbying campaign, he lost to candidates from France, Somalia, India, Brazil and Lebanon. On 6 February the Lebanese candidate was sworn in, signalling an end to Sir Christopher’s nine-year term of office.

This is a bitterly disappointing diplomatic failure and can only be a step in the wrong direction for what the FCO describes as “global Britain.” This follows recent setbacks and vote losses at the UN, such as on the Chagos islands. During voting rounds, the UK candidate’s support in the UN General Assembly fell away sharply, leading to a run-off with the Indian candidate, which ended in deadlock. Further rounds of voting led to no improvement in the UK’s position, despite consistent support in the UN Security Council, and on 21 November the Government conceded the contest to the Indian candidate.

This loss is of deep concern. One of the key strengths of the UK is our commitment to multilateral governance and the application of the international rule of law. These commitments will need to play a key part in the UK’s future foreign policy strategy and in any global Britain agenda. We conclude that the lack of a UK judge on the ICJ will harm the UK’s influence on the global stage and the UK’s future foreign policy strategy.

We heard a number of possible reasons for the UK’s failure from Ministers and former UK diplomats to the UN. These ranged from the popularity of other candidates to regional allegiances and a wider shift in power away from the permanent five of the Security Council, despite
the French candidate being re-elected. Perhaps the most concerning reason, however, was offered by Lord Hannay, a former UK permanent representative to the UN. He suggested that it might be an indication that the UK’s international standing had diminished, and that there might have been a fall in what he dubbed the UK’s “trepidation index”—how far other countries worry about treading on our toes.

What are the next steps? The FCO used tactics that had worked in the past and was surprised when they did not work this time around, because they expected Sir Christopher to win. The UK mission in New York lobbied extensively, as did the FCO’s network in London and overseas, and as did Government Ministers during bilateral discussions. But this did not work.

We are also concerned that the FCO does not appear to be particularly curious about why the support of other countries in the General Assembly fell away, and nor do Ministers seem too interested in finding out the reasons why the support for the UK diminished against what had been promised to them previously by other nations. When we asked the Minister what reasons he had been given by other countries, he was unable to give any definitive answer. Lord Ahmad, the Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the United Nations, did place some emphasis on building a “Commonwealth caucus” but was unable to tell us how many Commonwealth countries—not including India, of course, whose candidate defeated the UK’s—voted for the UK’s candidate.

The FCO has rightly launched an extensive internal exercise to identify the reasons for the failure and to learn lessons for future contests. It intends to keep the findings of that exercise private but, for the sake of accountability to Parliament and the public, we recommend that it should share its findings with the Committee, so that we can assure ourselves that it is taking the required action. The FCO should also inform the Committee each time it intends to campaign for a UN position, so that we can help. However, without the benefit of incumbency, the next opportunity to elect a judge of the ICJ will be much more difficult and the FCO needs to prove that it can adapt its approach.

One resource that the FCO does not make full use of is Parliament. Members across this Chamber and in the other place have international experience and networks that can be mobilised, and we have all been part of election campaigns. We recommend that the Government should brief the Committee and other relevant parliamentary groups on future elections to make best use of this resource.

We have to ensure that the UK’s influence and guidance on international organisations such as the UN is not diminished or diminishing, which is why the FCO’s lessons report is critical to determine the causes behind this embarrassing defeat. I commend this statement to the House.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his statement, and to the Select Committee for its work. Does he agree that this is particularly disappointing because the United Kingdom has historically had an immensely high reputation in international law and international tribunals, and has some of the most experienced and highly regarded international lawyers, of whom Sir Christopher Greenwood is one? Does he consider that one of the lessons to be learned, in contrast to what happened in France, is that the Government must be particularly careful, as we leave the European Union, not to give any signal that we place any less value on international rules-based legal systems and international tribunals, which should remain central to the attention of Her Majesty’s Foreign Office?

Ian Murray: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The former UK ambassador to the UN made exactly that point in evidence to the Committee. The UK was very much at the forefront in developing the international rules-based system, and we must be very careful that France does not become the voice of Europe in the UN Security Council, and therefore the voice of the UN when it comes to the place that the UK should be taking. There are, by convention—but by convention only—two places on the ICJ for European or western powers, and the fact that the UK is not there might show us that in some way the UK’s power and influence are much diminished.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way he has introduced our report. This decision has been taken while we are still inside the European Union. Does he fear that, if we leave the European Union, we will have even less influence in future?

Ian Murray: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is not only a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, but a distinguished former Chair. There is a real danger, as I have just said, that France will become the voice of the European Union in the UN Security Council, and therefore in the UN General Assembly, which means the UK’s voice would be diminished. No direct implications of Brexit were outlined in the report, but mainly because the Minister refused to answer whether that was a reason for the defeat. However, there is no doubt that the UK’s international voice is much diminished as a result of Brexit.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his statement and his Committee on its report. Reading the report, it does not strike me that this is about the loss of UK influence in the world; it instead smacks of complete cock-up by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, with a lack of ministerial direction about the importance of securing this re-election and, frankly, the civil service messing up the procedure for doing so. No wonder they do not want to share the internal report with the Committee—it would be embarrassing to senior civil servants and to the Minister concerned. I encourage the Committee to pursue the cock-up theory, rather than ideas about this country’s loss of overall influence in the world.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman raises a perfectly valid point. One of the recommendations in our report is that the FCO’s lessons learned report should come before the Committee, even on a private basis, so the Committee can be assured that this was a cock-up and not something wider. However, I draw his attention to the fact that the Foreign Office has used this process for a number of successful elections in previous years. Had the diminishing vote in the General Assembly been brought to the Foreign Secretary’s attention sooner, it may or may not have helped, depending on whether or not the Foreign Secretary may or may not help those
particular processes. However, the hon. Gentleman’s points will be taken back to the Committee and used in future reports.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): This is a blow to our international influence, and certainly to any notion of empire 2.0. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that kind of language and attitude is perhaps a contributing factor to these decisions, including the decision to refer the Chagos islands case to the ICJ? Does the Committee intend to look into whether our lack of a judge on the ICJ may have any influence on its decision on the Chagos islands case? From my point of view, restoring the islanders’ right to return would be welcome.

Ian Murray: The Chagos islands issue is not mentioned directly in the report, although it is used as an example of where the UK has taken votes to the UN in recent times and lost. It is clear that not being on the ICJ diminishes the UK’s voice on making sensible decisions at the UN. One of the report’s conclusions is that the real difficulty is not directly the loss of a judge on the ICJ but in how we get a judge back on to the ICJ. Incumbency is a special thing in being able to promote a future election. Indeed, not being the incumbent will make it much more difficult next time.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I wonder whether my hon. Friend got the same impression as I did. Repeated witnesses told us that there was a kind of shrug at international meetings, with people saying, “What on earth are you doing with regard to Brexit? Why are you choosing to step back from your international role?” That might have contributed to this election result.

There was a second kind of shrug from all the Government Ministers, who seemed to go, “You win some, you lose some. Does it really matter?” If that is the sense permeating throughout Government, we certainly will lose influence around the world. Do we not need a much stronger sense of leadership from the top of Government, and particularly from the Foreign Secretary?

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend is also a member of the Committee. He is right that we extensively questioned Lord Ahmad, the Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN, on the reasons for the loss of our place on the ICJ, and he did not seem to have any reasons for that loss. We questioned him in depth on what countries had fed back to him on why they did not vote for the UK, or why they voted for the UK in the first round and then changed their vote to another nation. Again, he did not really have a reason. There seems to be significant complacency in the Foreign Office, and Ministers, the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office will have to up their game significantly post Brexit to ensure that the UK’s voice is not diminished.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I compliment my hon. Friend and the Committee on this report. Does he agree that one of the results of the election is damage to our reputation within the UN structure itself? To take anything other than an enthusiastic view on how we can rectify the situation and do better next time would be foolish for our worldwide reputation.

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend is right that we have to learn the lessons, which is why we have asked for the private report to be shared with the Committee when it is produced so that we can monitor what is happening in terms of future elections. One of the strongest recommendations in our report is to allow Parliament a role on these issues. Many people in the Chamber, including the distinguished former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), go on international delegations. As individual Members of Parliament, we could ensure that we use those bilateral relationships to make the case at key votes in international organisations, including the UN. That would help to keep the subject at the top of the agenda when we speak to bilaterals across the world. That is one of the key recommendations that Parliament should seriously consider so that we can all help to make sure that we win future votes.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will join me in congratulating my hon. Friend on his presentation of the Foreign Affairs Committee’s report and, indeed, in congratulating all the Members involved in the content of that report.

Did the Committee take evidence on whether the cuts to the Foreign Office’s budget affected its ability to lobby for the judge?

Ian Murray: Many of the reports that the Foreign Affairs Committee has produced and is currently producing have questioned the Foreign Office on whether it has the necessary resource. The report presented by the Chair of the Committee last week showed very clearly that the Foreign Office looks as though it is robbing Peter to pay Paul, moving staff around the world to increase its presence in bilateral countries in the European Union—that resource has come from other places.

Lord Ahmad, the Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN, told the inquiry that he wanted to look at whether we should work on a Commonwealth caucus but that he does not have any resources to do so. It seems that the Foreign Office’s priorities are the EU, the Commonwealth and developing relationships with China and other trading partners, but the Foreign Office has no additional resource. There have been bids to the Treasury, and we encourage the Treasury Bench to consider those bids seriously so that the Foreign Office is well resourced to be able to achieve those goals.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): I also congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this slot on the Floor of the House. This is the second week in a row that the Foreign Affairs Committee has succeeded in presenting one of its reports.

I am pleased to hear that the Committee is visiting Birmingham today. As a west midlands MP, I welcome that outreach. I simply want to record that I have listened to all today’s exchanges, which will be communicated to the Foreign Secretary and the ministerial team. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will obviously formally respond to the report in due course.

Ian Murray: I am grateful to the Minister for that response. We look forward to the Foreign Office not only responding to the report but producing the lessons learned report for the Committee so that we can see what we can do to ensure that Parliament can be involved in these voting processes.
12.37 pm  

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure you will have seen the news that a foundation hospital trust in Gloucester has just announced it is setting up a wholly owned subsidiary—that is where a hospital trust essentially sets up a private company and transfers NHS staff, and indeed assets, into that company. Dozens of hospitals are doing this, or are looking at doing it, because of the underfunding of the NHS. It will create a two-tier workforce, thousands of jobs could be transferred and, essentially, it is a backdoor privatisation.

Has the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care given you any notice that he will come to the House to explain why the underfunding of the NHS is allowing the fabric of a public national health service to be undermined in that way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I have not received any notification that the Secretary of State intends to make a statement on this issue, but I am sure the Treasury Bench has heard the concern. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will continue to pursue this through the routes available in this House, of which he is very well aware.

12.40 pm  

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I beg to move, That this House recognises that seasonal migrant workers make a substantial and positive impact on the UK economy; believes that easy access to seasonal migrant workers is vital for economic prosperity; and calls on the Government to bring forward proposals to allow businesses to continue to access seasonal migrant workers from EU and non-EU countries.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for accepting the application for this important debate, and I thank the right hon. and hon. Members who supported it. I also thank all those in the British agricultural community who have campaigned relentlessly on this issue, and I am grateful for the work that has been carried out by the all-party group on fruit and vegetable farmers, of which I am a vice chair.

Madam Deputy Speaker, £1.2 billion was the value of soft fruit production——

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Is the hon. Lady not a little surprised that given that the word “agriculture” is in the title—a bit of a hint there—this debate is not being responded to by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and that a Home Office Minister is responding instead? Is it not important that we get DEFRA to put on the record what its position is on this crucial issue?

Kirstene Hair: I believe we have the right Minister on the Front Bench; this is an immigration issue, and that is the case I am indeed fighting.

The sector has grown by 131% over the past two decades. These incredible figures are proof of all the skill and talent, and the industrious nature, of the British farmer. My constituency reveals the true scale of production that is now possible. Despite being less than 3% of the country, we certainly pull our weight, producing more than 30% of Scotland’s soft fruit. The noble strawberry is symbolic of Angus, and it is a wonderful experience for my constituents to be able to buy on their doorstep a punnet of fruit that has been grown in the surrounding countryside.

Given this sizeable industry, within the first two months of being elected I personally toured all the major fruit farms in Angus. I was greeted with a product with a taste and flavour that would be the envy of anyone, but I was also confronted with something else: a sector that was struggling. Although automation and modernisation are at the centre of the British farming sector, as they should be in any area that wishes to thrive, certain aspects of getting a crop from the field to the supermarket shelf will still require a human touch and may always rely, to a degree, on manual labour. At this time, the picking and harvesting of soft fruit crops can only be done effectively by hand. The picking of crops requires efficiency, endurance, and a deceptive level of knowledge. It is not a simple task. The whole production process is not down to unskilled labour, as is often said, but rather a skill gleaned through years of working on farms. Without question, this is tough work. I remember as a child a day of fruit picking being sold to me as a fun day out, but as soon as the sick
feeling overcame me from eating too many raspberries, the novelty soon wore off and the labour intensity of the role shone through.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend has brought my childhood to the forefront of my memory, because I was brought up in Forfar in her constituency. There, we used to spend at least half of our summer holidays picking strawberries and then raspberries, and in October we would have the tattie holidays, picking the potato crop. That was how we grew up and learned how to work. I congratulate her on the case she is making that this is a skillset that is developed—sometimes it is even genetically passed through generations—and we should be protecting it. She is making a convincing case. Does she believe there is also scope for investment in technology—mechanisation and automation—in this area?

Kirstene Hair: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. It is incredibly important that we look into automation, but I do not see how the soft fruit sector could adapt to full automation; there will always be a degree of manual labour.

About 80,000 men and women currently make the journey across to the UK to take part in this process. It is estimated that by 2019 this figure will rise to 95,000, due to the expansion of many farms, as well as the elongated season that arises from the innovative farming techniques we now see. Make no mistake: this is seasonal work and there is no need for pickers all year round. They are required for the preparation, planting and, in higher numbers, the harvesting. Precision is key; there can be no delays in farming. Being too late or too early has catastrophic effects on the quality and subsequent price—

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The hon. Lady mentioned the duration of the season, but how long does she think that duration is? It has been put to me that because of polytunnels the season can be as long as nine months.

Kirstene Hair: I would agree with what the right hon. Gentleman says; the National Farmers Union Scotland’s recent report “CHANGE” suggests a season of up to 10 months, but I would say the nine to 10-month period would cover the harvest of soft fruit and of other sectors.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): There are some other sectors where it is much more difficult to have such an extended season, such as in the new vineyards we have in the south-east of England and in south Wales. It is a very short season there and quick decisions have to be made as to the right day to start picking if we are to get the best products out of the grapes. Does the hon. Lady therefore accept that we are going to have to have a proper system, as a matter of urgency, if we are not to see all those grapes, and the soft fruit, go to waste?

Kirstene Hair: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I absolutely agree with what he says. Later in my speech I will address what I believe that system should look like to ensure that all sectors of agriculture can take full advantage.

In the past few years the recruitment of these 80,000 seasonal agricultural workers has become increasingly difficult. This is not a problem that is unique to the UK; it is being encountered across farming communities throughout Europe. In the past, Britain’s seasonal workers typically came from eastern Europe. High unemployment and lower living standards in these regions meant that the possibility of seasonal work in Britain, regardless of its brief nature, was appealing. According to data produced by the World Bank, unemployment in Romania, Bulgaria and Poland in 2000 stood at 7%, 16.2% and 16.3% respectively, whereas in 2017 the figures were 5.9%, 6% and 5.1%. I am sure everyone in the Chamber will agree that the prosperity now enjoyed by these states should be applauded and is testimony to their own economic endeavours. However, the impact that this success has had on British farming, along with other factors, including the weakened pound, enhanced welfare in Romania, Bulgaria and Poland, and people’s desire for a more permanent role, is why we are all here today.

Without sufficient farm workers, crops are left to rot in the field—a scene that was, unfortunately, witnessed last year. Some farmers, for the first time, had to watch their wonderful premium produce waste away in the fields, as the workforce had dispersed by late in the season. A recent survey conducted by NFUS horticulture and potato members between January and February of this year had some startling outcomes, which I hope will convey the seriousness of the current situation. All 100% of those who were contacted said that they were “concerned” or “very concerned” about the impact that labour shortages would have on their businesses in 2018 and beyond; 46% said they had difficulty harvesting their 2017 crop due to labour shortages; 65% of respondents said that recruiting non-EU workers was more challenging in 2017 than in 2016; and 74% anticipated new and increased challenges in recruiting non-EU workers in 2018.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Has my hon. Friend heard, as I have done from growers in my constituency, that the particular worry is the decline in the number of returning workers? The returning workforce is really important, as farmers are used to having the same workers coming back year after year, and these workers already have the skills and knowledge to be very effective and productive.

Kirstene Hair: I agree with my hon. Friend on that. My soft fruit farms in Angus have workers who come back for six, seven, eight, nine or 10 years, and we are also seeing a decline in that. Obviously, that skill we are losing in British farms is of great concern.

Most alarming was the farming industry’s response to these issues. Farmers are businessmen, after all, and if the figures do not stack up, they have little choice, no matter how difficult that decision is. Some 58% of respondents said they were likely or very likely to downsize their business and 42% said they would cease current activity. British Summer Fruits and the British Leafy Salads Association, which collectively represent 90% of growers in their sectors, carried out a similar survey in 2016, which had results reflecting those of the NFUS one. However, this most recent survey is more startling.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the hon. Lady for having secured this debate. I was contacted a few months after the referendum by a farmer in my constituency.
constituency who said that the farm manager, a Polish gentleman who had been working seasonally for him since Poland had joined the EU, brought a skilled crew of workers every year. They had never had any problems at the UK border until the weeks after the 2016 referendum, when every single one of them was stopped and given the ninth degree about who they were, what they were doing and why they were coming to the UK. Has she picked up anything from the farmers in her constituency to suggest that this very clear message that these workers were not welcome at the UK border is helping to deter people from even attempting to come here to work on our farms?

Kirstene Hair: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but I do not think his story would resonate with any of the farmers in my constituency. There has been an issue for several years, since before the referendum in 2016, and any farmer would agree with that.

Action must be taken, or we will watch the demise of an industry that is so inherently British. Migrant workers enjoy coming over to the United Kingdom, which is why so many farms have loyalty from them, year after year, with some having a 10-year return rate. They are rewarded with a healthy wage—some pickers in Angus earn up to £12 per hour, which is well above the minimum wage.

As for a solution, there is only one choice: the introduction of a system that permits individuals from European and non-European states to come to the UK specifically to carry out this seasonal work. This is not labour that can be undertaken by the existing British workforce. We do not have the numbers in the rural areas where it is required, and nor do we have people who are willing to undertake the lifestyle that is necessary for the harvesting of crops. Early starts and intensive work is the norm. As I said before, it is skilled work. One can go and pick fruit, but to achieve the necessary rate requires stamina and skill, which are generated over time. To put it simply, it is hard graft.

It is without question that if a job is available, a British person should have a chance to compete for it, but I am reminded of an example that demonstrates my point. There is a producer, which I shall not name, that has two occasions attempted to find seasonal staff from among the local workforce. On the first occasion, the producer worked with the local jobcentre and advertised extensively on social media and in the recruitment section of the local newspaper. There was a high volume of local applicants and the producer went on to hire 90 workers. Within three weeks, only 10 members of staff remained. In 2017, the same producer offered 12 jobs; 10 employees started and only two remain. The job is simply unattractive to the domestic workforce.

In July last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) led a debate on this very topic. He stressed the need for the introduction of a seasonal migrant scheme, and drew the support and presence of Members from across the political spectrum, including the shadow DEFRA Minister at that debate, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). The need for a scheme has only grown with time, as has the support for it. I am grateful for the encouragement and backing from the entire Chamber, with Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish National party and Democratic Unionist party representatives all urging the Government to act.

I have strongly supported this issue since I came into office and know that it requires the input of the farming community. Following constant lobbying from my local farmers, I have taken the case to my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Home Secretary, to immigration Ministers, and to the Prime Minister herself. Along with the National Farmers Union Scotland, I have pressed our argument at every level. Every time I have delivered my case, it has been recognised. I will continue to push for swift action.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate and on the great work she has already done to try to push this matter forward. This is of course an incredibly important issue, but does she agree that there are many other industries that would also like the Government to look at their workers’ immigration status, including financial services and our great universities? Does she agree that the Government in the round should be doing an extensive piece of work on what the immigration system should look like to support those industries post-Brexit?

Kirstene Hair: Obviously, a lot of work is going on through the Migration Advisory Committee, and that will be produced in its totality in the autumn. I fully agree that immigration is not just important for the agricultural sector; indeed, in hospitality and many other sectors people are genuinely worried and looking forward to the immigration framework that is produced in due course.

I was delighted when last month my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs accepted an invite to Angus, when we toured the largest fruit farm in my constituency. During our meeting, and after repeated questions on the subject, I was finally promised that a clear answer would be given on the issue. That was repeated at the National Farmers Union conference last month, although it was within neither the timeframe that I requested nor the one that the farming community requires. Farmers need clarity and they need it urgently. I will continue to fight until we receive it.

Why do we need a scheme so urgently? Three words: harvest twenty-eighteen. It is imperative that we act now, because our farmers cannot plan, cannot invest and cannot ensure that the crops they sow will be harvested. This is an industry in turmoil. The Migration Advisory Committee is currently producing a report on the impact of European economic area workers in the UK labour market, and it will be published in the autumn. Following consultation with farmers in my constituency, I contributed to the report, stressing the situation in Angus. I am certain that other Members present also added the voices of their own constituents.

We do not yet know the findings of that developing report, but the MAC has in the past been vocal about the necessity of retaining seasonal workers. In a report from 2013, when the previous scheme was repealed, the MAC acknowledged the likely events that would take place:

“Growers were in general agreement that, at least in the short term (one to two years), they will be able to find the required supply of seasonal labour from Bulgaria and Romania. However, based on their experience following the EU accession of eight
Eastern European countries (A8) in 2004, growers expressed strong concerns that they will find it increasingly difficult to recruit workers from Bulgaria and Romania, who will likely seek employment in other sectors with less physically demanding work and more permanent employment. In addition, because SAWs workers predominantly live in situ on the farms, and thus provide a flexible and quick response to peaks and troughs in filling orders, farmers are concerned that, without a scheme, workers will be less flexible and reliable."

The introduction of a new scheme, similar to the one that was abandoned, is the only option. It is imperative that we create a system that makes the process of coming to work in the UK for seasonal periods as simple and attractive as possible. Migrant workers should have the ability to work across farming operations, perhaps starting off dressing potatoes, then bringing in a cereal harvest, and finishing in a soft fruit tunnel. We need a system that enables them to work wherever there is demand in the agricultural industry. That is what the workforce wants and what the farmers want.

Countless countries throughout Europe are having to turn to alternative means to secure new labour sources. Spain is dependent on labour from the north of Africa; Italy has previously recruited large numbers from Bangladesh; and Germany, like us, has been dependent on Romania, Bulgaria, Poland and Croatia. We are competing directly with those countries, and if we do not ensure that British farms seem the most appealing prospect, foreign workers will go elsewhere, as they rightly should.

In closing, I say again how much I—and, I am sure, farmers throughout the United Kingdom—appreciate the presence of all Members today. There is a need for us to make progress during this debate and for a system to be put in place in the very near future. Since 2013, there have been calls for a seasonal agricultural worker scheme, and with every year that has passed the situation has become more strained. The British rural sector is a key part of our national economy, and one in which we have seen tremendous success in recent years. More broadly, our international standing in respect of agriculture is impeccable. I am so incredibly proud of the produce that we grow across Angus and, indeed, our United Kingdom. I so desperately want to ensure that our high-quality British produce will dominate our shop shelves. We must safeguard this industry; I hope that this debate will help to guarantee its protection.

Last year, somewhere between 10% and 15% of fruit and vegetables were ploughed back into the ground due to the lack of available labour. There are different reasons why some labourers may not want to come—it is to do with not just Brexit but the change in the value of the pound—but they did not come because there was very little encouragement for them to come. The scheme is all about trying to make sure that there is sufficient labour from abroad. Labourers have traditionally come from abroad, so this is not a recent thing; it has happened for decades. It has been more important recently because we do not have enough domestic labour. There is an issue to be addressed there.

People say that technology may be one of the answers, but, unfortunately, technology cannot yet pick strawberries—not without bruising them and making them next to useless. I do not understand why it has taken so long to address this matter. Is it because DEFRA has not made strong enough representations? The Secretary of State seems very keen to go out and embrace every green group and get every farming organisation on his side, and, certainly, he seems to be very savvy with the media, but when it comes to delivery on a fairly basic part of his Department’s responsibility, we have not seen any real action. Although he has not been in office for that long, this is a pretty important issue for the farming community. I know that because the NFU and other parts of the farming industry lobby me regularly and tell me that this is, while not their top concern, one of their major concerns.

My first question is why the matter has not been addressed. Is it because the Secretary of State is not able to make efficient representation, or is it just that, at the moment, the Home Office seems to want to block any attempt to allow people into this country because it wants to get the numbers down, even when those people are desperately needed, as they are in this sector? The hon. Lady told us that very clearly.

My second and concluding point is that we need to recognise that the whole rural community feels that it is not being listened to on this issue, especially given the way it has made its representations—over time and in a very detailed, comprehensive and thoughtful manner. The hon. Lady quoted all the figures, and I will not in any way try to reproduce them. My understanding here is that, unless we get those numbers, organisations will go out of business and fruit and veg will not be picked. Indeed, it is not just that part of the agricultural industry that is facing these issues. The dairy industry has regularly employed people from abroad. Those people come here because of the nature of the experiences they get, the English they learn and, indeed, the way in which we have looked after them for generations. So the second underlying point here is the rural economy versus the urban economy. I make no bones about the fact that I am always trying to represent the rural community in my constituency. Its voice is not always heard as loudly as it might be and it is not always heard as loudly as it might be on these Labour Benches, but it is important that we get its point of view across. It is important to ensure that our farming industry has a very strong voice, because it will mean that we get action.

Therefore, between DEFRA not delivering on this and the rural community feeling somewhat isolated and unable to deliver on one of its key demands, we need some assurance from the Home Office today that it will...
move this matter forward. It is too late for this year; the harvest is already well under way in that it has been planted. Perhaps somebody, somewhere, will pick the produce, but—I am not being funny—who will want to change their whole life experience by suddenly thinking come May, June or July, “Well, I’ll go to Britain.”

People make plans months and months in advance, and yet they have been given no assurance whatever that a scheme exists for which they can get a visa, and no assurance that they will be—dare I say it—welcomed in this country, because there is an underlying view either that they are not needed, or that they are needed in far fewer numbers than they used to be.

I say to the Home Office: please can we have a scheme back in place? Hopefully, it will do what the old scheme used to do, which was very efficient—in fact I do not know why it was removed. I was not in the House at the time, so I was not part of any decision. None the less, it was removed and we are now seeing the catastrophic consequences of that. It is a tragedy when food is wasted because it is not picked. We need an answer today, and we need a scheme, if not for this year, certainly for next year. Perhaps people will reconsider and still come to this country in the summer. I pray that the Home Office and DEFRA will get their act together and put this scheme back in place, because it is desperately needed.

1.5 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing the debate and on putting the case for farmers in Angus so passionately.

In my constituency of Chichester, we are home to a fresh food industry that has an annual turnover in excess of £1 billion and employs 9,000 people full time. This industry has thrived for several reasons, not least because, apparently, we are the brightest part of the UK, with our sunny climate and coastal proximity, which magnifies the brightness by up to 10%. This makes Chichester a great place to grow fruit and veg.

The growers in my area can only continue to grow, in every sense of the word, if they have the workforce to harvest their crops. According to the chairman of the West Sussex Growers Association, the impacts of Brexit, or the EU referendum, are already being felt. Investment locally has been held back by many growers, as they are awaiting the outcome of the negotiations. I am aware that some of their costs for raw materials have increased by up to 20% owing to the falling value of the pound on the international markets. On the flipside, our currency devaluation has made our home-grown crops more competitive, so, for some, sales are up.

Seasonal migrant labour within the growing industry has been part of its history since the post-war period. The work that it does is often physically demanding and repetitive, but it is skilled. I can personally attest to that as I have had the opportunity to pick peppers at Tangmere Airfield Nurseries, where they supply 50% of all the UK grown peppers sold in supermarkets nationwide.

Many growers are struggling to maintain the levels of labour needed. The NFU industry survey identified a shortage of 13% across the 2017 season, peaking in September at 29%, and a fifth of businesses said that last year had been the hardest recruitment year compared with any previous years. Furthermore, growers in my area claim that recruiting more skilled employees who are fluent in English has recently been much harder. They have attributed that to the lower value of the pound, which has meant that seasonal workers can earn just as much, or more, in other European countries, and we are competing for that talent. As a consequence, 73% of UK industry employers are taking steps to encourage seasonal recruitment, with wages up by 9% in 2017 over the previous year.

The rural industries have generally made efficiencies and increased productivity by using advanced robotics to move rows and rows of pots through giant glasshouses from seed, to germination, to packaging. As an industry, the utilisation of technology is key, and growers and farmers in my constituency have invested heavily in that area. However, there is still a point at which people are needed, most commonly during the picking stage.

In Chichester, the industry is keen to upskill and train its employees, and has begun to implement training schemes using the apprenticeship levy. In the coming weeks, several growers are meeting representatives from further education colleges to see how they can collaborate on apprenticeships schemes using the levy and have more home-grown resource.

On my visit to Tangmere, I met a former packhouse worker from Poland, who now runs the whole warehouse operation. As in any industry, hard work and talent are rewarded with promotion. For example, the entire management team at Hall Hunter, a local producer of soft fruits in my constituency, is from Bulgaria.

Since the referendum, immigration control has been discussed by people in the industry at length. Owing to the short-term nature and skill level of the majority of the work, we need to create a migration tool to ensure that our rural industries are able to attract and recruit the people they need. Many, including the NFU, are calling for the reintroduction of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme—known as SAWs—which could be an appropriate mechanism to ensure labour security for the sector while maintaining control of our immigration system.

Whatever system we put in place, it must facilitate seasonal workers to come to this country to fulfil the needs of the sector. The system needs to be as frictionless as possible, allowing for remote application and high levels of automation, and ensuring that there are as few barriers as possible to bringing in the much-needed labour. Flexibility is required to take into account crops with longer harvest seasons or career progression for those skilled workers who are offered it.

Although the rural industries are concerned about workers as we leave the EU, they also see opportunities as a consequence. Many are hopeful about access to international markets where we can sell our quality produce. Others feel that there may be opportunities to expand our market share domestically as some crops are undergrown in the UK, including tomatoes, of which a massive 90% are imported, despite having the perfect growing conditions in Chichester.

We must do what we can to make sure that we have a suitable mechanism in place to support the growing industry, ensuring that it has the right workforce it needs when it is needed. If we can get this right, I am confident that this industry will continue to thrive in my constituency and across the UK.
1.10 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this important debate and the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) for leading it with an excellent speech. This debate could not have come at a more critical time for British farmers. Despite the weather outside, summer and the harvest season will be upon us before we know it. I am glad to have been able to co-sponsor the application as another vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for fruit and vegetable farmers.

We have already heard how important migrant labour is to our farming sector. That is true all year round, not just for seasonal work. It is true right across the supply chain—not just in picking, but in packaging and processing, right through to the retail and hospitality sectors. Migrant labour is important not just in low-skilled work, but in highly skilled jobs such as food scientists and vets, which I will mention again later.

Migrant workers have made a huge contribution to the British economy. The whole rhetoric during the Brexit campaign about their being a drain on local resources was not matched by the figures. They have a lower than average use of the NHS, use local shops and put money into the local economy. As we are hearing today, they will be much missed when they are no longer welcome on these shores. The debate today is about seasonal migrant labour, which is where the most pressing problem lies. This is not just a far-off problem that we need to deal with in the distant, post-Brexit, post-transition period future. The shortage in seasonal workers is happening now.

There are already alarming reports that food is rotting in British farms as there is simply no one available to harvest it. In total last year, something like 4,300 jobs were left unfilled. One farm in Scotland had to leave up to 100 tonnes of blueberries at a cost of £500,000. Another farm in Kent could not find workers to pick 2,000 tonnes of raspberries, costing it £700,000. Although demand for British fruit and veg has risen drastically—demand for strawberries alone rose by 180% from 1997 to 2015—the ability to source migrant workers has fallen. In September 2017, a huge 29% shortage was identified, and there are reports that the 2018 harvest has already been written off by many farmers. At a recent meeting of the APPG, which the farming Minister attended, we heard from a farmer in Kent—I think it was the same farmer who had lost £700,000—that he was already incurring significant losses due to a shortage of labour. He was talking about moving a substantial part of his business to Spain, which is clearly not what we want to happen.

Besides the obvious problem with food waste and inefficiencies, these rotting harvests jeopardise the already thin profit margins of British farmers, putting their entire businesses at risk. There is also the risk of cutting off the ongoing supply of quality British food getting to our supermarkets, as well as the tarnishing of the British brand abroad if we are unable even to get our own food out of the ground. As we have heard, the truth is that it is becoming far more difficult to attract workers.

In recent years, agriculture has become so heavily reliant on workers from eastern Europe, particularly the recent EU accession countries. Statistics show that migrants make up about 20% of regular full-time staff in the agriculture sector, with the majority coming from Romania and Bulgaria. According to estimates from the Association of Labour Providers, 90% to 95% of seasonal agricultural workers are from other EU countries. But as people from these countries now have the right to work and settle in the EU, they are looking not for seasonal work, but for permanent, better paid jobs often in towns and cities, rather than in rural areas. They want to be in places where they can bring their families with them, with better schools and local opportunities for family members to get jobs—places where they can make a life.

We saw this first with Polish workers. We have heard from farmers that, going back a few years, perhaps 90% of their labour force were from Poland. That has very much disappeared, as those workers have been replaced by people from the newer accession countries—the Romanians and Bulgarians. However, these new workers are now following the Polish workers into permanent jobs in the towns and cities.

Pay and conditions for agricultural work are not attractive, certainly not enough to attract British workers and increasingly not enough to attract migrant workers either. Accommodation in rural areas is expensive and, if provided by employers, it is often very basic at best. In some cases, it is far worse than that. Unite the union has done some excellent work highlighting some of those concerns in its excellent report, “From Plough to Plate”. We also hear stories about the role of gangmasters and even human trafficking in the food and agriculture sector.

The labour shortage is real. It is an immediate threat. I am not being alarmist and neither are other Members who are raising these concerns. The Government urgently need to address the issue. This was recognised by the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, on which I sit. Last year, we conducted an inquiry into labour constraints and published our report in April, just before the election disrupted everything. We took evidence from a Home Office Minister and a DEFRA Minister, and we felt that there was a huge degree of complacency from the Ministers that the issue was something that we could muddle through, that it would all be fine and that we did not need an urgent response. Our report concluded that:

“We do not share the confidence of the Government that the sector does not have a problem: on the contrary, evidence submitted to this inquiry suggests the current problem is in danger of becoming a crisis if urgent measures are not taken”.

We also had real concerns about the lack of empirical evidence on which the Government based their decisions; they were using flawed statistics. In another of the Committee’s recommendations, we stated:

“We are concerned that the industry has such different experiences to those reported by the Government”.

In other words, the Government were not listening to experiences directly from people working in and running businesses in the sector. We continued:

“It is apparent that the statistics used by the Government are unable to provide a proper indication of agriculture’s labour needs. These statistics and their utility for measuring supply of, and demand for, seasonal labour must be reviewed by the end of 2017 to give the sector confidence in the adequacy of the official data on which employment and immigration policies will be based for the period after the UK leaves the EU”.

It is an understatement to say that the Government’s response, which came out in October last year, was weak. It showed shocking complacency. The Government
chose to reject the hard facts and data that had been presented to the Committee by the sector, and failed to acknowledge that their own statistics were not fit for the purpose of measuring seasonal labour in specific sectors.

The strong feeling that I had during these discussions in the Select Committee and the APPG was that an ideological fervour for Brexit among certain Ministers—and, with that, unbending support for stringent curbs on freedom of movement—had completely overridden any common-sense approach to this problem. The response was very much, “We voted for Brexit. We voted to stop freedom of movement. That is our approach, no matter what evidence we have that this is going to harm the British economy.” I have heard that the then tourism Minister—the current Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen)—took a very different approach. When he was in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, he went in to bat with the Home Office for the tourism sector, saying that hospitality absolutely needs some flexibility to bring in migrant workers. That approach was not replicated by the farming Minister, which is one of the reasons why we are where we are now.

It was very welcome that the Environment Secretary made positive noises about reintroducing the seasonal agricultural workers scheme in his recent speech to the NFU. That scheme was scrapped in 2013 on evidence that we did not need it because we had workers from accession countries—the Romanians and Bulgarians. However, that is now no longer the case. It is worrying that we are only now starting to talk about the possibility of reintroducing SAWS; it would be far too late to get such a scheme in place for this year’s harvest.

However, I am not convinced that reintroducing SAWS would, in itself, solve the problem. As I have said, many people who would previously have done such work simply do not want to do it, and do not need to do it, any more. The exchange rate, the uncertainty following the Brexit referendum, the feeling that they are not welcome here, and even the British weather all mean that working elsewhere in the EU is a more attractive option. When we heard, the economic situation in their own countries has improved to the extent that perhaps they do not need to come over here. Certainly, the poor exchange rate means that the financial benefits of doing so are much less, and taking home money with which they can afford to pay for things in their own countries is not such a pull. Even countries such as Poland cannot get workers; it is looking to Ukraine, for example, for people to do its agricultural work.

I do not see how far we can carry on with this chasing after cheaper labour, looking ever further afield. A year or two ago, I was on a flight from Stansted to Moldova that was full of Romanian workers who had clearly been hopping on budget flights, coming over here to work, and going back to their families at the weekend. If we are looking further afield, budget flights on easyJet are not going to bring in workers from Vietnam or Cambodia for £30 a time.

**Tom Brake:** Is the hon. Lady aware that someone who is now a Cabinet Minister suggested that in Kent, I think, farmers should start preparing to bring in people from Sri Lanka? I do not know whether that Minister also agreed to pay for their flights.

**Kerry McCarthy:** Exactly: to what extent do we keep chasing? As other countries become more affluent, why would people come here and not go to other countries where they would be able to earn more without—

**Mr John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Lady will know, presumably, as she has clearly studied these matters very closely, that SAWS brought in people from all kinds of places—from Africa, Asia, and so forth. When that scheme ended, that opportunity ended for those people too. Does she welcome that?

**Kerry McCarthy:** I think we are going to have to look further afield. I am not arguing against reintroducing SAWS; I am just casting doubts on whether that will be enough to address this problem and whether we will be able to attract workers. We will find that this applies even to some of the countries that we previously recruited from. For example, British companies in Kenya are sourcing beans, flowers or whatever—monocrop cultures—and employing workers there. Will we be able to attract workers to come over to Britain for the British summer when there is production in their own backyard?

There is much talk of stepping up recruitment of British workers—the Government focused on that quite heavily in their response to the EFRA report. We hear about having more skills, and the role of agriculture in universities and in high tech. It is very important that we encourage far more people to go into agriculture and the food sector, but those are not the types of jobs that we are talking about. The problem with attracting British workers is that the areas with the highest unemployment do not tend to be that close to the areas that need these seasonal workers. Students are often mentioned, but they have many other options. Moreover, as the hon. Member for Angus said, this is quite tough work. It is not just about fruit picking in the summer when the sun is shining, if it is, given the British climate; it is about jobs like picking Brussels sprouts in the freezing cold. It is backbreaking work, not something that people do because they fancy a little holiday while getting a bit of pocket money on the side.

As the Environment Secretary acknowledged in his recent speech, the sector will also have difficulty in accessing skilled labour when freedom of movement ends in areas where shortages are currently filled by European economic area workers. Some 90% of abattoir vets come from EU countries, and the vast majority arrived in the past five years, so they are not automatically covered by the right to stay here. The existing immigration system for non-EU skilled immigration is complicated, expensive and slow. There is no Environment Minister here today, but I would like to know—perhaps the Immigration Minister can tell us—whether the Environment Secretary has made a submission to the Government’s Migration Advisory Committee on the future visa needs of the sector, as well as pushing for SAWS.

At a broader level, the Environment Secretary sees the long-term solution to this problem lying in the move from “a relatively labour intensive model of agriculture to a more capital intensive approach.”

However, automation and mechanisation, such as robotic fruit harvesting, is said to be at least five years away from commercialisation, and that means five years of
missed harvests and countless farms going under. Even after those five years, probably only the largest, most profitable businesses will be able to afford to buy into such technologies. There are also some areas in which, I am told, automation is simply not possible. Asparagus has to be picked individually. Raspberries are too delicate not to be picked by hand.

This is part of a much broader concern. I would have liked the Environment Secretary to come before the House this week when the agriculture Command Paper was published. In fact, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on agroecology for sustainable food and farming, I have just put out a statement welcoming very much of what is in that Command Paper and the whole concept of moving to public money for public goods. I hope that he will consider the strong case made by people in the agroecology sector for making farming more sustainable and more environmentally friendly. We also need to look at the economic viability of the sector. Sufficient labour is environmentally friendly. We also need to look at the money for public goods. I hope that he will consider the Paper and the whole concept of moving to public money for public goods. I hope that he will consider the strong case made by people in the agroecology sector for making farming more sustainable and more environmentally friendly. We also need to look at the economic viability of the sector. Sufficient labour is absolutely crucial to that. We need some answers here today from the Home Office. We also need a much stronger focus from the DEFRA team, who are not here, on what they are going to do to address this impending crisis.

1.26 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), my co-chair on the APPG on fruit and vegetable farmers, on securing this important debate and on giving us the opportunity to have this important and urgent conversation in the Chamber. I also thank her for all the work she is doing to campaign for seasonal workers. It is a great pleasure to campaign with her on the matter.

With fields in my Kent constituency currently blanketed in snow—as is the case. I am sure, for pretty much all of us—the pleasures of summer strawberries and autumn fruits seem rather far off, but that is certainly not the case for our fruit and vegetable growers. They are already very worried that they will not have enough workers to harvest the crops this year. The NFU has been gathering extensive data on the growing problem of the workforce shortage. For example, in May last year, there was a national shortage of 9,000 workers. Later in the year, 60% of apple and pear growers reported that they were short of labour for their harvest. Last year was difficult; this year will be harder. As for further into the future, farmers are very worried.

The uncertainty has consequences. It takes three to six years to grow a productive fruit tree. Farmers are putting off investment decisions because of their fears about future access to labour. Thirty-one per cent. of top fruit growers say that uncertainty about staff has made them change their investment plans, so some are reducing investment, some are scaling down their businesses, and some are saying that they are going to chop down and scrub up their orchards.

That is particularly sad and worrying in the context of the past couple of decades, which have been a great British success story for fruit and veg growing. It has been a great area of growth for our economy. For example, home-grown berry production has increased by 131% in the past 20 years and the industry is now worth £1.2 billion. Strawberries have gone from being a luxury that a family might occasionally buy for a special event such as a barbecue to being a very normal and common part of a family’s weekly shop throughout the summer—and very frequently British berries are being bought. The UK’s production of fruit and vegetables is a great success story for our country. It is a growing industry that we should be supporting. But unless we fix the labour shortage, prices will go up, fewer people will be able to afford British fruit and vegetables, that growth may well reverse and a share of the British produce that we currently consume will be replaced by imports.

Like the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), I have a farmer in my constituency who is not alone in shifting production overseas because of the shortage of labour here. Labour shortages are not just a problem in Britain. As other Members have said, the whole of the European Union is struggling to recruit its workforce for picking fruit and veg. Germany, Holland, Spain, Portugal and Poland already have permit schemes that enable them to recruit workers from beyond the EU. If in the UK we introduced our own seasonal workers scheme, that would simply allow our growers to compete on a level playing field with their foreign competitors.

Since I became a Member of Parliament for a Kent constituency, where we grow lots of fruit and this is a common topic of conversation, I have often heard people say, “Why can’t British people do the work?” In the past we had the wonderful thing of people coming out of London to pick fruit in their holidays. Constituents tell me that they first came to Kent from the east end of London with their family when they were children to pick fruit and hops. It is also said that students could make up this workforce.

I have spoken to the growers in my constituency about this. They too would like to recruit British workers—local workers—to pick and pack the fruit and they have tried to do so. They have advertised locally and some have sometimes managed to recruit a very small number, but they know from experience that the local workforce do not supply the labour they need.

Part of the problem—and this is a good thing—is that we have very low unemployment. In my constituency there are about 700 people currently claiming jobseeker’s allowance. In the season, farms in my constituency require a workforce of 5,000 to 10,000 workers, and one farm alone employs around 1,000 seasonal workers, so those 700 people in my constituency looking for jobs simply cannot plug that gap.

Mr John Hayes: As my hon. Friend will know, I represent a constituency that, with the surrounding area, produces about 30% of the fresh produce in the country, with a big demand for seasonal labour, which it has had for a very long time. Would she concede that the ready supply of relatively inexpensive labour displaces investment in recruitment, in skills and in technology and automation? That is certainly the macroeconomic evidence from around the world, as well as in this country.

Helen Whately: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. When employers have access to a ready supply of relatively cheap labour, they may choose...
to use that workforce rather than invest in technology. We know, though, that there are particular challenges with the automated picking of soft fruit, which I will come to in a moment. Although we would like to see more automation, it is not going to be achieved overnight. We need a near-term solution to the immediate labour problem, hand in hand with investment in the technology that can help us to shift to a less labour-intensive industry.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some valuable points. Will she not only join me in welcoming seasonal migrant workers to help in constituencies such as mine, but work with me and others to put pressure on the Government to ensure that we are championing our agricultural industries and increasing their prestige and the jobs that they create? They will then become viable options for young people, and we will show young farmers the great contribution they are making in constituencies such as mine and hers.

Helen Whately: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We absolutely should be championing our agricultural industries and encouraging and enabling more young people to go into careers in agriculture. There is a challenge for farmers: they would hope to be able to recruit skilled British labour for all sorts of jobs, but young people are tending not to go into the sector. We should absolutely encourage British people to do that.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, while we all support greater investment in technology within the agricultural sector, we are never going to be able to have a technological solution for harvesting in conditions such as those on hillsides in south Devon?

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I am wary of saying “never”, but it is true that, with certain landscapes or certain produce, it is very difficult to have an entirely automated production chain. That is simply impossible, or certainly a very long way off. In the process of getting there, we must ensure we do not destroy our industry. If we do not even manage to sustain the industry now, we will not have the opportunity to do all sorts of wonderful automated fruit production in future.

Many people have said that we might be able to employ students, but as Members have said, the duration of the season has changed. Thanks in part to things such as polytunnels, we now have a much longer fruit-growing season and it is far longer than the student holidays. Along with the expectations of the consumer and the supermarkets and the requirement for a certain level of intensity and consistency in production, that means that a casual student workforce simply is not the right answer for modern production.

In the long term, recruiting people from further and further afield is probably not the answer either. It probably is not going to make sense to fly people from the other side of the world to come and pick fruit indefinitely. As I said, I think automation will gradually replace manual labour, and in some parts of the production line it already has. There is a large amount of automation in various parts of the production line, particularly for vegetables, rather than soft fruit.

Farmers and growers tell us that the robotic picking of soft fruit is a long way off. A robot has been developed, but it is very slow. It is certainly not able to do it at remotely the rate or cost-effectiveness that is expected by supermarkets and consumers. When a product is being manufactured, the robot needs to pick up a consistent part and put it into something, but every single bit of soft fruit is different. That requires a huge amount of sophistication from the robot’s vision systems and artificial intelligence. That technology is out there, but we are some way off.

That said, I very much welcome that, in the newly published Command Paper on the future for food, farming and the environment in a green Brexit, there is a recognition of the need for investment in research and development in agriculture to improve productivity. There is also an industrial strategy challenge fund to support this area. I urge the Government to do even more to consider how to incentivise automation in the horticulture industry but, to be clear, the benefits of that automation are particularly for the future. We have to deal with the immediate problem our farmers have and their ability to harvest fruit this year and in the next few years.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. She is right, of course, that there will continue to be a demand for labour, but that demand is not static, for the very reasons she has just given. In Lincolnshire, colleagues are working with the local enterprise partnership and the University of Lincoln to look at exactly the matters that she has described, and I invite colleagues across the House to do so with their own local universities and LEPs. There is real progress to be made in looking at where greater productivity can stem from greater automation and technology, as well as the investment in skills that I mentioned earlier.

Helen Whately: I agree with my right hon. Friend.

I want to talk briefly about the health dimension of this debate. There have been headlines just this week that more than seven in every 10 people born between the early 1980s and mid 1990s will be overweight by the time they reach middle age. We know that one in five children are obese by the time they leave primary school. One part of tackling the obesity crisis we face as a society is to encourage people to eat more healthily.

On average, our fruit and veg consumption needs to increase by 64% to be in line with the Government’s dietary guidelines, and one of the biggest factors influencing people’s food choices is price. The price of fruit and veg is already going up. On average, prices of the most popular vegetables rose by 3.2% last year, and fruit prices rose by 7.2%, compared with overall inflation of 2.7%.

Just the other day, I happened to be talking to a couple of mothers, who told me how they were shopping around to get the best value fruit and veg. For instance, they chose a shop that sells carrots, including the funny shaped ones, for 39p a bag, because they wanted to give their children a healthy diet. They are worried, however, about the rate at which the price of fruit and veg is increasing; if those prices continue to go up, they are worried about whether they will be able to afford fresh fruit and veg for their families.
Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for kindly giving way. Fruit and veg is seasonal and so are the prices, because of availability and supply and demand internationally. It is interesting that she mentioned carrots, because that process is now highly mechanised. I own a carrot factory—it is in my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. The automation is such that the lifting, washing and selection of carrots are all mechanised, but the price of carrots and vegetables has never been so low. We are in a very competitive industry.

Helen Whately: I defer to my hon. Friend’s expertise on carrots. The reason I gave them as an example is that they were mentioned by those two mums. The point I was making was how price-sensitive they are. I have heard people say, “Oh, fruit and veg are really cheap”, and that that is not a factor in shopping choices, so I gave that example to illustrate that shoppers look very carefully at the specific prices of fruit and veg. As prices go up—as I have said, the price of fruit has gone up on average by 7.2%—they will affect people’s choices and their ability to purchase fresh fruit and veg for their families. In particular, I am worried that the labour shortages now and those on the horizon will only push up further the price of fruit and veg.

A seasonal workers scheme would help British growers to keep on producing affordable fruit and veg. While we are on the subject, I think that the new agricultural policy is an opportunity for us as a country to go further, to try harder and to look harder at what we can do to support the production and consumption of fruit and veg. We need to look at how we can support growers more, looking the whole way along the supply chain. We need to consider how we can reward retailers for selling healthy food and how our overall agricultural policy can encourage and enable consumers to buy healthy fruit and veg, so that the British people can eat a healthier diet. We now have a golden opportunity to do that as we rethink our agricultural policy.

None of that, however, will be possible without a workforce to pick and pack the produce we grow. Therefore, I again urge the Government to introduce a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, to not keep our growers waiting, to put an end to this uncertainty and to get on with it.

1.43 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). I suspect that we know some of the same farmers and they are quite complimentary about how she represents them on this issue. I hope, however, that she will rediscover her inner remainer and join us in a campaign to stay in the European Union, because the farmers in Kent to whom I have spoken would certainly like us to do exactly that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing the debate. She and others have given us all an opportunity to reminisce on the strawberry or raspberry picking that we did in our youth. I picked strawberries in France for 50 hours a week, at 10 francs an hour. I can confirm that after my first day of strawberry picking, I was sick as well, and that I dreamed of picking strawberries throughout the rest of the month, because that was what I was doing. I can also confirm that the explosive capacity of a raspberry is much greater than that of a strawberry and that, on impact, a raspberry makes a bigger stain.

My speech will be based mainly on my knowledge through family who are farmers in Kent. Their experience is that there has already been a significant downturn in the number of workers coming from places such as Bulgaria and Romania. That is happening for a number of reasons, one of which is that the value of the pound has dropped, thereby reducing their remittances. Their own economies are also growing strongly, in part as a result of their membership of the European Union. Although Members of this House are occasionally reluctant to talk about the benefits of the EU, I suspect that it has played a significant part in the economies of Bulgaria and Romania. Given their growing economies, I am concerned that the process of Brexit is making it harder for the UK to export to the very markets that we have helped create through supporting those countries’ membership of the European Union.

I am told that the workers who are coming now are older and less well educated, so it is no longer the students who are coming, but an older section of the population who, unlike the students, often do not speak English. Those students came partly because they wanted to practise their English and earn some money, but also because they wanted to consider staying in the UK for the longer term. Clearly, that is now of less interest to them, because of the perception, and more, of the United Kingdom since the vote on 23 June 2016.

As a number of Members have already said, we should not expect those people to be replaced by UK workers. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent referred to the 700 people on JSA in her constituency; clearly, if all 700 of them worked, they would not replace the 5,000 to 10,000 seasonal workers who come to work on the farms in the surrounding area. The hon. Member for Angus has confirmed that the picking season can last up to 10 months, so such workers are required for a substantial period. One farmer to whom I spoke said that he has always sought British workers for his farm. In six years, he had one apply but they lasted precisely two and a half weeks. We are not going to find people in the UK jobs market to replace everyone currently working in a seasonal capacity.

Where will the workers come from? As countries such as Romania and Bulgaria get stronger, and given that alternatives such as Spain and Germany are now more attractive to them because of the fall in the value of the pound, we need to look further afield. I do not agree that we need to look as far afield as Sri Lanka; the farmer I spoke to reckons that the additional cost for that might be three times that of bringing over someone from Ukraine. The farmers would have to bear that cost, which would make our industry less competitive. Indeed, that is already happening because the workers who are coming over now are older and less productive, which adds to costs and will presumably also lead in the longer term, if not immediately, to an increase in food prices.

The old SAW scheme allowed workers from Ukraine and elsewhere to come, and that is what farmers want to happen. They want the market to be open to the 40 million Ukrainians and to the Moldovans and the Russians. That scheme was tightly controlled; it did not mean that people came to the UK to work and then disappeared.
into the jobs market. They came here, worked hard, earned money and then they returned home, so there was no issue with people disappearing and working unofficially. That is what is being called for, and I believe that Poland is now providing visas to Ukrainians. Poland is benefiting from an influx of Ukrainians, and that is making its agricultural sector much more productive. Those workers in Poland earn the anything-but-princely sum of £20 a day—we would not want to replicate that here, but it demonstrates that Poland is accessing those workers who are contributing to its agriculture, while our agriculture is suffering.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent highlighted some cases of produce that had not been picked, but on the whole I think that Kent has probably just about managed this year, and it is the coming season that will present the real challenge. Any scheme needs to be up and running now—it cannot start in the new financial year in April or some time towards the end of the year. The season lasts for 10 months, and those people are needed now, not in four or five months. Hon. Members will have heard the figures quoted by the NFU about a 12.5% shortfall in seasonal workers this year, and the situation is unlikely to improve over the next 12 months.

A number of Members have rightly pointed out that although, in the longer term, automation might provide part of the solution—it has done so in some industries—currently it cannot do that in the agriculture sector. It is not about saying that because we are using all this cheap labour we are not investing in equipment; the equipment to invest in does not yet exist, although it might be there in five years’ time for apple and plum picking.

Colin Clark: I have already declared an interest in that I own a carrot factory. There is enormous mechanisation in factories. The right hon. Gentleman is right in what he says about the picking of soft fruit, but picking top fruit now involves serious mechanisation, as does processing it. Having been in the industry, I know that the availability of relatively cheap labour stopped an enormous investment in mechanisation, but such mechanisation has now come down greatly in price. Does he agree that some of the issues regarding the availability of labour will encourage factories to mechanise? Many of these jobs are very repetitive and would be better mechanised.

Tom Brake: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and I am happy that he intervened. This must be a balance, and my understanding is that although currently a huge amount can be done with mechanisation in a packing environment, we are not yet there for apple and plum picking, and we may not be there for three, four or five years—who knows? There is a lot of talk about technological solutions being the answer to the border issue between Ireland and Northern Ireland—or, indeed, between Camden and Westminster—but in practice those blue sky solutions do not yet exist. I did hear someone suggesting that drones might be the solution to the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, so perhaps that is also the solution for picking apples and plums. Realistically, however, those technological solutions are not yet there.

What is the solution to this problem? Hon. Members will not be surprised to know that the Liberal Democrats will continue to campaign for a vote on the final deal, so that if people do not like what they are offered once an eventual deal is struck between the UK Government and the EU, they have a chance of pulling away from it and stopping Brexit. If that does not happen, what is the immediate solution to our problem? Clearly, it is to allow workers from EU and non-EU countries—increasingly, it will be non-EU countries—to come to the United Kingdom through controlled schemes that have worked effectively in the past. It will also be about supporting technology to ensure that investment goes into those areas where that can make a difference.

We also need a seasonal scheme. In the past I have heard senior Ministers say, “Oh, we can sort it all out by introducing six-month visas”, but that will not be sufficient. As we have heard, the season now lasts for 10 months, so the visas must be longer than the six months proposed. If all that can be implemented now—not at the end of the year and not next season—there is a realistic prospect that most of our farmers will be able to pick all their crops. If we do not act now, however, there is a real risk that reports towards the end of this year will be about a substantially greater proportion of fruit and veg left to rot in our fields.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is just possible that our farmers will get through this year because freedom of movement is still available and farms have access to eastern European migrants who hopefully will come and do the work. Next year is when it all kicks in, because freedom of movement will end and the available sources of labour will go with it. At that point we will need innovative solutions to bring in seasonal labour so that the crops can be picked.

Tom Brake: I agree entirely, and there must be a sense of urgency about this. As I understand, however, yesterday the Government made a U-turn, and having said that March 2019 was the cut-off point for new arrivals, they will now allow people to continue to arrive during the transition period. If that is correct, that may help the industry for a further few years.
[Dr Sarah Wollaston]
great uncertainty about the transition period, and as we have heard so compellingly from Members across the House, even if a transition period is in place, there is a shortage in our workforce here and now, and we could use the mechanism of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme to address that.

The Government have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to research the impact of leaving the European Union on the UK labour market, and to consider how to align immigration policy with a modern industrial strategy, but that is not due to report until autumn. It will then take time to implement such a scheme, and I do not think we have the luxury of that time.

Many nations across the EU already supplement their workforce with a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, so will the Minister give us some hope that the Home Office will take a decision on this issue sooner than we would expect under the current timetable, with a report coming forward in autumn? As we have heard, the uncertainty is delaying investment now for the future, and we need something to take back to our constituents who work in these important businesses. They are already making great efforts to recruit locally, but as we have heard, even with those efforts and schemes to encourage and retain a UK-based workforce, they are still dependent on a workforce that is supplemented from outside the country.

As the mother of someone who works in the robotics industry, I appreciate the investment going into these technological solutions. I am afraid, however, that it simply will not provide all the answers we need to make sure our crops are picked in a timely manner. There can never simply be an answer.

Colin Clark: We have heard from other Members that the labour force will have to come from outside the EU and the EEA. As we leave the EU, is this not an opportunity for a policy to employ people from outside the EEA area? If we were not leaving the European Union, there might not be the same opportunity because of EU regulation.

Dr Wollaston: I really think this is entirely in addition to it. I remain of the view that we should be focusing on the issues of frictionless trade and keeping very close links to our European Union partners as we exit the EU. I think these issues will arise irrespective of that, as we have heard. Whatever the situation with transition, I hope that the Minister will consider this as something we could use to supplement the arrangements we will have.

Most of all, I would like the Minister to give us some indication of when we are likely to see a decision. Farmers in my constituency here and now are starting to make decisions about their future plans and investment that will impact not only their businesses; remember that they also employ a local workforce in many other capacities, and their decisions will affect them. The implications for our industry are very far reaching and I hope the Minister will give some indication of when we are going to see an answer.

2.1 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on an excellent introduction to the debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time for it. I draw the attention of the House to an interest. I receive support from the Good Faith Partnership, which provides a secondee in my office to work with me on migration issues. The secondment has just started in the past few days and I will be placing details in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests later on this week. I also speak as chair of the all-party group on migration, and it is in that capacity that I want to contribute to the debate.

Last year, the all-party group produced a report on the impact specifically on small and medium-sized enterprises of losing access to labour from the European Union post Brexit. We heard evidence from employers and recruiters across a range of sectors—not just agriculture and food processing, although clearly that sector faces an important and very urgent need—all of whom highlighted the need for access to skilled labour, but also to so-called unskilled labour, at times of heightened need. We heard from other seasonal sectors, including air conditioning and central heating engineers, and the hospitality sector, which has peaks at Christmas, Easter and over the summer. The point was made clearly to us that jobs in customer services or catering, for example, while possibly seen as unskilled jobs, cannot be characterised as unskilled in terms of the nature of the activity that needs to be carried out.

The variety of sectors and job roles that reflect the need for seasonal labour points to the need for a range of tailor-made immigration solutions. As we have heard this afternoon, that should not preclude the upskilling of the domestic workforce and increasing participation among underemployed sectors of the domestic workforce, such as older workers or those who are not in education, employment or training. It is important to say, as have heard this afternoon, that seasonal jobs are not always attractive to UK workers. It is not just that they cannot be bothered to do them in all cases. It may be that they live in the wrong part of the country and have family commitments, and so cannot move to take seasonal work. Low pay may make it simply economically unviable for UK workers to take some of these posts, and the arduous physical nature of the work, which we heard about from the hon. Member for Angus and others, means that older workers might struggle to take up the hours of work in those jobs.

Already, a number of sectors have expressed alarm about the impact of Brexit on long-term access to labour. As Professor Jonathan Portes said, we need to attend not just to the question of the UK choosing which migrants come to this country but to making sure that the migrant labour that we need chooses to come to us. Yet even as early as the beginning of last year, alarm bells were sounding from a range of employers and recruiters. Lee Biggins, the founder of CV Library, told us that her employment agency was seeing that scale of recruitment for seasonal agricultural workers, 15% down in April compared with the same month the year before, and 20% down in March this year compared with the previous year. Similar concerns were expressed by Tim Rumney, of the Lake District Hotels Association, in February 2017. As the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) pointed out, it is important to note
that not just short-term labour market needs but often our long-term needs are met by seasonal workers coming and gaining skills, and then staying on and progressing to fill skills gaps in industries in this country over a longer period.

The Recruitment and Employment Confederation reports that recruiters were already struggling to fill some low skilled roles before the 2016 referendum. It points out that increasing labour shortages could lead ultimately to higher costs for consumers as a result of higher recruitment costs, greater bureaucracy to bring in migrant workers and the cost of visas for more migrant workers, which SMEs who gave evidence to our all-party group inquiry would be unable to absorb and would need to pass on to customers. Consumers might also experience a knock-on effect on service levels, and for the workers themselves there would be an increased risk of exploitation and illegal working, which is a concern.

The Recruitment and Employment Confederation also says, as we have heard repeatedly this afternoon, that while automation is clearly part of the solution to our labour needs in a number of seasonal sectors, it will be practically and economically viable for only some of the labour currently performed by low-skilled seasonal workers, at least for the foreseeable future. Interim solutions—quite long interim solutions—are therefore needed now for a number of sectors.

Whatever immigration schemes Ministers devise in the coming months as we anticipate our departure from the EU, they must not be solely designed on the basis of EU workers currently working in full-time permanent positions and the need to replace that form of labour in the UK. The evidence points clearly to the need for a range of tailored solutions. We have heard much this afternoon about the possibility of reinstating a seasonal agricultural workers scheme and other sector-specific solutions, although the Institute for Employment Studies points out that too many sector-specific solutions will increase, rather than reduce, complexity for employers.

The focus must be on designing simple and cost-effective reasonably priced application processes, recognising that it is employers who will bear the costs, but that they will pass those costs on to customers at the end of the line. It is not possible to look at blanket approaches to setting salary or skills thresholds, and it is very important that appropriately light-touch processes take place at our borders to enable migrant workers to come in. At the same time, immigration strategy must pay careful attention to the impact on host communities. Local authorities need to be supported and encouraged to develop strategies for integration, even of short-term workers, to improve community cohesion and avoid seasonal workers facing ostracism, isolation and abuse.

Finally, the Government will of course rightly want to give attention to the risks of exploitation and, in its most extreme form, trafficking and abuse. That clearly requires the enforcement of decent working conditions and minimum wages, working with employer and employer bodies to stamp out abuse, and ensuring that there are good sources of independent information and advice available to migrant workers both in their home countries and when they arrive here.

All these strategies are emphasised in the draft global compact on migration, which is now being negotiated at the United Nations. They point to the need for a holistic strategy in the immigration White Paper, which we anticipate in the next few months. I conclude by saying to the Minister that it is important that the strategy and White Paper come forward as soon as possible. Clarity is needed now for businesses and workers alike.

2.10 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing this debate on an important issue for so many agricultural businesses across the United Kingdom. She described very well the issues and challenges, and I do not intend to repeat them in the short time available to me this afternoon. A number of agricultural businesses in the borders rely on seasonal migrant workers, although not to the same extent as in Angus, so I thought that it was important to make a short contribution to the debate.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to put on record the fact that seasonal workers are very much welcome in the borders and contribute hugely to the local economy. There are businesses such as that of Neil Thomson—of Caverton Mill farm near Kelso—who employs more than 20 seasonal workers to pick over 200 acres of broccoli and cauliflower. These workers are reliable, hard-working and they contribute to the local economy in the Scottish borders. Indeed, one has been kept on permanently and has moved his family to the area.

As others have mentioned, there have been challenges in recruiting seasonal workers in recent years, but we have to be careful about attributing that to Brexit. Across other sectors, including hospitality and healthcare, the number of people coming from the European Union to work here has been falling. That trend started long before the EU referendum was even announced.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s point about seasonal workers, but if he looks at the figures for all of Scotland, he will see that almost 50% of the workforce in hospitality in Edinburgh and Glasgow is made up of people who come from elsewhere in the European Union. How would a seasonal workers scheme help that when at the moment, as members of the European Union, they can come here freely?

John Lamont: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that point. I would say that this debate is focused on the agricultural sector. There are definitely challenges in other parts of the economy, but that does not remove anything from the fact that in the past 10 years there has been a downward trend in the number of workers who are coming from the EU to work in our economy.

Seasonal work in the United Kingdom now appears less attractive than it was a decade ago because of a range of factors. A number of Members have described those, but the most notable is the drop in the value of the pound. Many voices in the industry favour the reintroduction of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which came to an end following the admission of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU. We now have the opportunity to bring this scheme back or at least to look at something similar—an opportunity that has only been brought about because of Brexit. I join in calls for the United
Kingdom Government to look closely at reintroducing the scheme as a way of meeting the seasonal needs of farmers not just across Scotland and in my constituency, but across all the United Kingdom.

A final point I want to make is that this issue starkly highlights the importance of maintaining the United Kingdom’s internal market and the easy movement of staff across the UK—something that the Scottish National party Government in Edinburgh seems unable to understand. Seasonal migrant workers often start working in one part of the United Kingdom and travel across the country on different jobs in one season. The effect of the SNP’s call for a separate immigration policy would make it harder for workers to do that. As Jonnie Hall, the director of policy at the National Farmers Union Scotland said, the last thing that farmers need is a “checkpoint at Berwick”. As is often the case, the needs of the farming sector are the same north and south of the borders, and it is in the farmers’ interest that this is dealt with on a UK-wide basis, rather than on a Scottish-only basis.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Lamont: I give way to the hon. Gentleman for Edinburgh West.

Christine Jardine: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving way, but if the last thing that the NFU wants is a checkpoint at the border, why does he think it would appreciate one between here and Europe?

John Lamont: I understand that Lib-Dem party policy is for us to go back into Europe, but the reality is that the British people have voted in a referendum to leave the European Union. We have to accept the democratic decision of our fellow countrymen and women and I do not accept any suggestion that we should veto that or say that they have not made the right decision. We now need to get on with Brexit to deliver the best result for all our constituents—for Scotland and all of the United Kingdom. I appreciate that the Lib Dems do not agree with that, but we must now get on with Brexit as best we can.

As I said, we need to deal with immigration on a UK-wide basis, rather than take a Scotland-only approach. Instead of constantly pushing for differentiation from the United Kingdom, the Scottish Government would better serve farmers by working with their UK counterparts to ensure that we develop a seasonal migrant system to meet the needs of Scottish farmers.

I conclude by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Angus again on bringing this important debate to the attention of the House, and I look forward to working closely with her, and the United Kingdom Government, to get the best deal for Scottish farmers.

2.15 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Dydd gywl Dewi hapus to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all here. Happy St David’s day—and happy first day of spring, just in case anybody did not notice. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I commend the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) for having secured it.

Many years ago—I suspect before some Members here were born—I worked for the Health and Safety Executive, based in Dundee, and I spent quite a lot of time around Angus and Perthshire visiting small local businesses. One thing that struck me then was that in addition to the significant direct employment in fruit growing and fruit processing in places such as Angus, Perthshire and Aberdeenshire, the number of small, family-owned businesses and other trades and professions that rely on agriculture is massive. There are mechanics, engineers, blacksmiths, lawyers, accountants, and haulage contractors, as well as the visible jobs, with people out working in the fields. Effectively, the whole economy of that part of Scotland is underpinned by our soft fruit and produce industry. That is why it is so important to protect it.

Scottish quality fruit and veg now adds £300 million a year to our GDP. It is 10% of our entire agriculture output—almost as much as the much more obvious Scottish farming industries of dairy and sheep farming, for example. Whatever happens with our relationship with the EU and others, I hope that those who rightly take massive pride in producing some of the best fresh fruit and veg in the world will continue to market it under Scotland, the brand, to draw attention to the fact that it is branded as being as good as anything people can get from anywhere else in the world.

I note that in a single year, one growers co-operative, actually based in Angus, reported a loss of income of £660,000, simply because of labour shortages in a single year. That is one co-operative of 18 growers that is not likely to be any different from a lot of others. This industry and this part of our economy is under severe stress and severe threat. As my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) pointed out, it is difficult this year, but if the Government do not act, and act very quickly, next year and the following year could become impossible. This has been an iconic part of Scottish culture for decades, if not centuries, but we could see an end to soft fruit growing in parts of Scotland. I will come on to the UK Government’s response to that potential threat later.

It was reported in The Guardian last summer that a survey by the NFU found that between January and May 2017, farmers in the UK recruited a total of 13,400 workers, 14 of whom were from the United Kingdom—not 14,000 or 1,400, or even 140, but 14 out of almost 13,500 came from the United Kingdom. Other speakers have commented on the complex reasons why it is simply not credible to expect overseas seasonal migrant workers to be replaced by home-grown workers any time in the next 10, 15 or 20 years, and perhaps never at all. The industry will not last that long if we cannot pick the fruit from the fields.

We also have to remember that as well as the potentially disastrous impact on parts of our agriculture sector, the Government’s attitude to immigration—they treat it as numbers to be dragged down at all costs—affects so many other things which, certainly in Scotland and many other parts of the United Kingdom, we should be proud of having built up over the years.
Relative to the size of its population, Scotland possibly has more of the world’s top universities than any other country. Part of the reason for that is the number of overseas students and the number of exceptionally talented and dedicated overseas staff, including research staff and lecturers, who have come here purely as a result of freedom of movement, and who no longer express an interest in coming because they are not sure what their rights will be.

The demands on our NHS and care services are obviously very much in our minds at this time. Those services also rely heavily on incoming workers. I hope that it is not stretching relevancy, Madam Deputy Speaker, to give a special mention to a consultant surgeon in Glasgow who this morning walked for three hours in the snow to get to work in Paisley. That is the sort of dedication that we see among NHS workers, regardless of where they have come from.

According to the article from The Guardian that I mentioned earlier—written last year—the director of an employment agency called Hops Labour Solutions, which exists to bring in seasonal workers to support the UK agricultural sector, said:

“The grim reality is that the perception from overseas is we are xenophobic, we’re racist”.

We might take exception to those words—we might like to think that we are not xenophobic or racist—but if that is how we are perceived by even 10% of people who might have been thinking of coming to work in the United Kingdom, we have a problem. It is a sad but undeniable fact that one of the immediate impacts of the vote to leave in the referendum in June 2016 was a massive spike in racist and racially motivated crimes in many parts of the UK. Thousands of EU nationals living in the UK have come before Select Committees and told us that they have experienced a significant increase in racially motivated attacks, that they have begun to feel that they are no longer welcome, and that friends who have thought about coming here have been made to feel that they might not be welcome either.

I am not saying that that was one of the Government’s intentions in calling the referendum, and I am certainly not saying that it was the intention of anything to stop the 17 million people who voted to leave, but we must face up to the fact that, as one of the consequences of the referendum, a climate or undercurrent has been allowed to develop which makes people from the European Union feel less welcome and less valued than they were before. If the Government continue to ignore or deny that, the problem can only continue to get worse.

The hon. Member for Angus pointed out, very eloquently, that although some parts of our fruit and vegetable growing industry can be mechanised, others cannot at this stage, and it will be several years, if not longer, before that will be possible. Solutions that rely simply on significant investment and mechanisation might work in some industries, but they certainly would not work for soft fruit growers.

When we debated the seasonal agricultural workers scheme last year, the then Minister gave an assurance that the scheme could be reintroduced within five to six months if necessary. I suggest that it is now necessary, and that the Government should be seeking to reintroduce the scheme within far less than five to six months if that is at all possible. They clearly accepted that there might be a need to change the bad decision that was made in 2013, and I suggest that the need has now been established.

Deidre Brock: At a recent Scottish Affairs Committee meeting in Fife, we heard the views of Jonnie Hall of NFU Scotland on that very issue. He told us how frustratingly difficult he found it to “get traction”, as he put it, with the Home Office to even meet and discuss the union’s suggested solutions for dealing with the looming crisis, including SAWS. Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on Home Office officials to meet representatives of NFUS and other experts in the sector as a matter of urgency to try to find a way out of this Brexit boorach?

Peter Grant: Absolutely, and I would extend that to many other areas of activity, whether in private sector industry or in our greatly stressed public services. Home Office officials need to get out of the office and meet the people who work in agriculture, the health and social care services and universities, and hear why their approach to immigration—whether it is immigration on a permanent basis or migration on a temporary basis—is simply wrong.

Pete Wishart: I was at the debate when the Select Committee reported the urgent requirement for a seasonal agricultural workers scheme and the five to six-month time limit was mentioned. Is my hon. Friend as baffled as I am over why those in the Home Office are so cloth-eared when it comes to the demands for the scheme? Could it have anything to do with their self-defeating obsession with immigration—with seeing everything through that lens, and stopping people coming to this country?

Peter Grant: I do not think that that criticism applies only to the Home Office. I think that it applies to the entire Cabinet and, indeed, the entire Government. There is still far too much of an obsession with immigration as a bad thing that must be brought down at any cost. It is becoming clear that if the Government are to get anywhere close to delivering the headline reduction in immigration that they claim would be a good thing, the health services and the agriculture sector will suffer, as will a great many industries.

I was somewhat surprised by what was said by the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). He made some valuable points, but he is in complete denial about one fact. Although this problem is not entirely the creature of Brexit, and existed to an extent before Brexit, anyone who claims that Brexit is not making the problem worse really needs to return to planet Earth. It is patently obvious what one impact—one inevitable consequence—has been, not only of the result of the vote itself but of the vile xenophobia that characterised so much of the debate. It was always going to be a consequence, and we are seeing it now, whatever the hon. Gentleman may try to tell us. It has made the United Kingdom a less attractive place for people to want to live and work in: it has made us less appealing.

The hon. Gentleman blamed part of that on the fall in the value of the pound. I wonder what might have caused the value of the pound to go through the floor
so suddenly, some time towards the end of the third week of June 2016. I wonder what it might have been that upset the international economists and business people at that time of the year. It did not seem to affect the dollar or the euro, so it cannot be blamed on global changes. Perhaps the Government tend to try to blame other factors.

Even the House of Commons Library, which is not generally renowned for taking sides in political debate—indeed, it is rightly renowned for not taking sides in political debate—tells us in the briefing that it prepared for today’s debate that since the closure of SAWS, and particularly in the run-up to the UK’s exit from the European Union, employers have been finding it more difficult to recruit staff from overseas. The Government’s responses, including the assurances that we were given on 6 July 2017 about the reintroduction of SAWS or a similar scheme, have still not been taken any further.

There has been mention of a consultation paper published a couple of days ago by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The foreword is written by the Environment Secretary. We in Scotland remember very fondly promises from the Environment Secretary, who assured us that one of the consequences of Brexit would be that Scotland could have control of its own immigration policy. Perhaps the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk would like to go and tell the Environment Secretary that he had clearly taken leave of his senses if he thought that that was ever a possibility.

In all the 64 pages of the consultation paper, the word “seasonal” appears once. The crisis facing parts of our agricultural sector as a result of the inability to attract seasonal workers is hardly even recognised by DEFRA’s flagship new consultation paper—and, presumably, draft policy. When it refers to the labour force that is needed in agriculture, it talks of the investment and skills needed to mechanise. It talks of engineers and science and technology workers. It talks of things that are needed in some parts of agriculture, but those things will make no difference whatsoever to the soft fruit industry, and to other parts of agriculture where mechanisation is simply not realistic. That gives the worrying impression that the soft fruit industry will be allowed, literally, to wither on the ground.

Since the Government wrongly abandoned SAWS in 2013—and we all remember the Home Secretary who made that decision, who knew better than all the farmers, the NFU, NFU Scotland and all the rest of them, who knew more about how to run agriculture than the people who worked in it—the difficulties faced by the sector have been made substantially worse, and will continue to become substantially worse.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I apologise for interrupting the hon. Gentleman and I appreciate that this is an important subject in his constituency and he has made some important points, but I point out to the Chamber that if the second debate that was due to take place this afternoon had not been cancelled, the time limit on Back-Bench speeches in this debate would have been approximately seven minutes, which is normal for a debate of this kind on a Thursday afternoon. The reason the second debate was cancelled was not in order that some Members in this debate could make speeches twice as long as they would have done in other circumstances, but because of the very unusual weather conditions under which we are operating.

While Members might be aware only of what is happening in this Chamber, I have in mind the hundreds of employees in this building who will have great difficulty getting home to their families today, and every extra minute taken in speeches in here is stopping somebody getting a train and having to get a later one that might now be cancelled. The hon. Gentleman is a most hon. Gentleman and he normally sticks very carefully to time limits. We do not have a time limit this afternoon, but he has taken twice as long as he would have taken if I had put a time limit on in normal circumstances. I am sure he will bear that in mind.

Peter Grant: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Pete Wishart: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The ruling you have just made is very important, and I wonder whether it might be worthwhile abandoning this afternoon’s business now so that Members and staff can get home sooner because of the inclement weather.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s point, but I have neither the power nor the inclination to abandon the business. I am, however, making an appeal to the decency of Members, and say that sometimes if one is making a point it can be made just as effectively if made more quickly.

Peter Grant: I certainly take on board your comments, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I was winding up anyway. Had there been a proposal from the Government to amend the Standing Orders today to bring forward the moment of interruption, I do not think any of us would have opposed that—even those of us who had known since Wednesday that we were not getting home until tomorrow.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Since that is a challenge to a point I have just made from the Chair, I say that it is not always necessary to make rules in order to have people behave with decency and consideration. The hon. Gentleman is one of the most considerate and decent Members of this House and I am making absolutely no criticism of him; I am merely pointing this out, and he is not the only Member who has exceeded the seven minutes that would have been the time limit.

Peter Grant: Thank you again, Madam Deputy Speaker. The scheme was abandoned wrongly, erroneously, arrogantly by a Home Secretary who would not listen to those who would be most affected, and that continues to be the tone of most of what the Government do in relation to both Brexit and almost anything else—and of course they always say it is all the Scottish Government’s fault.

The reason why we are having this debate and having to consider reintroducing this scheme is the Government’s continued obsession with freedom of movement being a bad thing that has to be stopped. Freedom of movement of people, and of goods and services, and of ideas and beliefs, is an unqualified, unreservedly good thing, and I want to see it retained as far as possible. I ask the
Minister again, although it is not her decision to make, to please go back to her Government and say to them that the way to prevent the massive disruption to our agriculture sector, and other sectors of our economy, both public and private, is not simply to urgently reintroduce SAWS to deal with the difficulties we will face this year, but to reconsider their unilateral decisions about freedom of movement, and to look again at whether we want to isolate ourselves from the biggest trading market in Europe. If we remain in the single market and the customs union most of the difficulties raised today will be reduced, if not solved entirely.

2.34 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I will speak briefly and quickly, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing it.

Between 2007 and 2013, the seasonal agricultural workers scheme facilitated Romanians and Bulgarians travelling to the UK for seasonal work on farms and, in 2012, the year before the scheme closed, 513 farms used the scheme and almost 21,000 work cards were issued. Seasonal workers from overseas have played a crucial role in the agricultural industry. For all the technology we now see on farms, and for all the automation and robotics, a human hand is still needed for many of the jobs involved in getting food from the farm to the supermarket shelf. As we have heard in the debate, 80,000 people a year make their way to this country to assist in this process. Ensuring a reliable workforce is available is so important, or else we will find ourselves in situations where fruit and crops are left to rot and waste.

There are worrying signs that a shortfall is affecting the industry. Last year, there was a shortage of 15% in seasonal migrant workers in the horticultural sector. The Scottish Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, is currently carrying out an inquiry into immigration. We have heard from a range of sectors who are experiencing, or are concerned about, such shortfalls and pressures. While members of that Committee may ultimately disagree about how best to tackle those problems—some preferring a regional approach, others, such as myself, inclined to look more towards a UK-wide sectoral response—there is no question but that immigration is necessary, and will continue, and we need to ensure that the UK remains an attractive place for individuals to come to work and live.

Immigration is not just necessary; it is also good and desirable. Britain would not even be half as “Great” today if it were not for immigration. It is for these reasons that I am joining calls from my hon. Friend the Member for Angus and many others in the Chamber today for the reintroduction of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which will allow people to come to this country to fill the gaps in our domestic workforce.

Such a scheme would allow us to guarantee access to the skills and labour that our rural businesses need, while also allowing the Government an important element of control over the number of people arriving here for work. Although I accept that immigration and the desire to control it underpinned a significant element of the vote to leave the EU, I cannot accept it was a direction to Government to somehow end immigration to this country and pull up the drawbridge. Rather, I take it as a signal that the British people want the British Government to be able to control the numbers who come here, based on our current needs. A seasonal agricultural workers scheme would allow us to do this, opening up more places at times of high demand and reducing them when the domestic workforce can cover the gaps.

Our post-Brexit approach to immigration should be flexible. The correct level of immigration to the United Kingdom is the amount of immigration we need at any point in time. We must be able to adapt our approach as our society and economy change. Another benefit of a seasonal scheme would be our ability to open it up more widely. Even prior to 2013, only select European countries could take advantage. I would like any new system to be open to anyone from any country who has the necessary skills and expertise.

Earlier this year, the Home Affairs Committee released a report, part of which looked at the old seasonal workers scheme. The Committee was overwhelmingly positive about it, saying it was “well managed by the Home Office” and that “growers got a supply of efficient labour, migrants received a good wage. British workers were not displaced and integration issues were limited”.

Following such a glowing report, why would we not reintroduce a similar scheme now?

Of course, in addition to any new seasonal workers scheme, I would like to see the Government taking steps to bolster the skills of the domestic workforce here in the UK and to do more to encourage locals into this kind of work. But it is important to recognise what employers are telling us: in this line of work, it is hard to recruit workers in sufficient numbers from the UK. That is the reality, so we must have a system that allows us access to the labour we need.

Contrary to common belief, a lot of this seasonal work is skilled. It is undoubtedly hard and time-consuming. The people who come to this country contribute to our thriving rural communities, and I am delighted to support a motion that would make it easier for that to happen. I urge the Government to take forward the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus in the motion.

2.37 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): In the interests of time, I will be very brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing this important debate.

Those of us who have taken the time to go across the road to read the EU exit analysis briefing—which has largely been leaked and is now in the public domain—will know that the agriculture industry will be the most impacted upon of all the industries following Brexit, and that is in addition to the effect of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which, as we have heard, came to a close at the end of 2013.

The scheme was set up in 1945 to address post-war labour shortages, and more recently it allowed fruit and vegetable growers to employ migrant workers from the European Union and beyond to do short-term, low-skilled agricultural work for a maximum of six months. The reason given by the coalition Government for the scheme’s
closure was that there were already sufficient numbers of workers to meet the labour needs in the agriculture and horticulture sectors. However, that has proven not to be the case. Since the closure of the scheme, the industry has been suffering a shortfall in workers, crops have been left unharvested and the very viability of the industry has been left in the balance. Many in the sector are calling for the scheme to be revived, or for something similar to be put in place.

As the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) stated, by the very nature of seasonal work and of having a short employment period, the work has historically proved unattractive to British citizens, and the numbers required in these rural areas often far outstrip the unemployed population in surrounding areas. The EU has introduced protection for seasonal workers in the agriculture sector in the form of the EU seasonal workers directive, which was adopted by the UK in 2014 and sets out the parameters that states must adhere to. Action is needed now, as 43% of labour providers do not expect to be able to source and supply sufficient workers for the food manufacturing and distribution sectors in 2018, meaning that food will be rotting in the fields because of labour shortages. If the Government truly care about supporting the agriculture and horticulture industry, they should introduce a new source scheme now or ensure that when the immigration Bill is introduced special attention is given to migrant workers that are needed to support this and other industries.

We need a long-term solution to labour shortages in the UK and the Government should not let British farms go under because of their arbitrary immigration targets. We need to make sure that the Government’s approach to Brexit does not adversely impact jobs and prosperity and that we have an immigration policy based on the needs of the economy.

2.40 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing the debate and I shall speak briefly.

Let me start by saying that, without wishing to be unhelpfully competitive, I think that the issue of migrant workers has been shown to matter perhaps more in my constituency of Boston and Skegness than anywhere else in the UK. I say that not because of the hugely valuable contribution made by people from outside Lincolnsire to our largely agricultural economy over many centuries, or because of the quality of the brassicas, but because it was the issue of migrant workers from primarily eastern Europe that in large part provoked the stronger vote for Brexit in Boston and Skegness than anywhere else in the country.

I have said before in this House that we should not be shy of saying that in certain parts of the UK immigration has historically proved unattractive to British citizens, and the numbers required in these rural areas often far outstrip the unemployed population in surrounding areas. The EU has introduced protection for seasonal workers in the agriculture sector in the form of the EU seasonal workers directive, which was adopted by the UK in 2014 and sets out the parameters that states must adhere to. Action is needed now, as 43% of labour providers do not expect to be able to source and supply sufficient workers for the food manufacturing and distribution sectors in 2018, meaning that food will be rotting in the fields because of labour shortages. If the Government truly care about supporting the agriculture and horticulture industry, they should introduce a new source scheme now or ensure that when the immigration Bill is introduced special attention is given to migrant workers that are needed to support this and other industries.

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I conclude by saying that this economically vital move can be a huge opportunity—an opportunity to avoid the mistakes of the past and to shape our country for a better future. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will consider both sides of that coin as she works on this vital project.

2.45 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing this important debate and agree with her that the issue is now becoming critical in dealing with some of the pressing issues we have in both of our constituencies. I could not help thinking of her predecessor, Mike Weir, who was such a doughty champion of agricultural businesses. I think it was Mike who, in making informed and proper interventions in a series of debates, first warned of the danger of losing the seasonal agricultural workers scheme and the impact that would have on businesses in his constituency and mine. I owe a great deal to Mike Weir for his work over the years.

I represent some of the finest agricultural businesses in Scotland. Strathmore, shared by me and the hon. Member for Angus—I actually used to represent her part of Strathmore years and years ago—and the Carse of Gowrie could perhaps be described as the bread basket of eastern Scotland. The town of Blairgowrie in my constituency is almost exclusively synonymous with the soft fruit industry. Much of the heritage of east Perthshire is bound together with tales of the berry farms and stories of luggies, cleeks and dreefs. This is all at risk because of the cloth-eared approach of this Government to the issue of seasonal agricultural workers and their self-defeating and damaging obsession with seeing absolutely everything through the lens of immigration.

For this Government, immigration is something that has to be stopped and that has to be curbed. What we are seeing now in our agricultural businesses is that this has become collateral and a real issue that now threatens the viability and survival of many farms in my constituency.

I tried to figure out why the Government were so resistant to proposing a seasonal agricultural workers scheme. It can only be about immigration, and if it is not the Minister can get up and tell me why there is that reticence. It is all about immigration, isn’t it? I am seeing a blank look, so I presume that it is. I know that everything about leaving the European Union is, for this Government, about stopping, curbing and doing everything they can to stop people coming into this country.

The hon. Member for Angus referred to the helpful and useful report from NFU Scotland that demonstrates the scale of the reliance on foreign and migrant labour of businesses in my constituency—and hers, and those of all other Members from Scotland. I know it is hard to believe, as we look outside and see the snow brought in by the “beast from the east” settling on the good city of London, but the first British strawberries of the season have already appeared. They have come from a place in south Wales, and they have beaten the record set more than 10 years ago in February 2006. This demonstrates the scale of the innovation in the industry; the technology that is being applied, and the way in which the season has now been extended by incorporating new planting methods and the use of polytunnels. The extended cropping period now usually lasts from April to the end of October. It is fantastic to be able to get a punnet of strawberries before the Easter holidays and still to be enjoying them beyond Halloween. That is the type of season that we now have, and it is an issue that we need to address.

However, something remains the same in the business despite the advent of new technology, and that is that someone has to ensure that the crop is planted, maintained and harvested. Someone still has to do that work. We have heard stories from other Members about this. When I was a young lad, that work was traditionally done by young local people. The young Wishart, for example, would regularly head out to the berry fields with his luggy by his side, enjoying the prospect of being in the open air and supplementing his meagre pocket money over the course of the summer. Then, in the tattie holiday, I would be howking the tatties oot the fields. That was the sort of thing that we always enjoyed. That work paid for my first musical instruments. That is the contribution that seasonal work in the fields made to the aspiring Wishart as a musician. Now, practically all that soft fruit is lifted by people from the other side of Europe, on whom our producers rely almost exclusively to get the crop in.

I was in this House when the seasonal agricultural workers scheme was put in place, and I remember the debates that we had on it. It has to be said that the Labour Government were always quite keen to get shot of it. They were not the most—how shall I put this—friendly Government towards the countryside and agricultural issues. Those issues were just not part and parcel of the way in which the Labour Government looked at things, and why should they be? Very few of their Members represented countryside areas. Then the Conservative Government came in, and we were told not to worry about the demise of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme because we were in the European Union. We were told that people from the accession countries—as they then were—would regularly come in because of freedom of movement, and that we would not need the scheme any more because there would be a steady supply of labour.

Well, that has worked out perfectly, hasn’t it? We are just about to leave the European Union, and all of a sudden, that source of migrant labour will diminish. I intervened on the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), to make that key point. We will probably just about get by, this year. I am not certain that all the businesses in my constituency will manage to survive, but I think that we will somehow muddle through because we still have that access to eastern European labour. However, that will go next year unless we have transitional arrangements in place. Will the Minister give us an assurance that there will be transitional arrangements until the Government get their act together? Next year will be critical, because our usual source of labour will end. I am not going to get into a debate about where we will look for other migrant workers. We have heard all this stuff about Ukraine and Sri Lanka, but that sounds like fantasy when we have had such a good source of migrant labour up to now.

The other massive disincentive that we have heard about today is the exchange rate. These seasonal agricultural workers could now go and work in more pleasant conditions in Spain and elsewhere in southern Europe where they...
would be earning euros, so the exchange rate would not be an issue for them. The Government should not pretend that the declining exchange rate has nothing to do with their chaotic Brexit. It has absolutely everything to do with it. We have taken a double hit when it comes to seasonal migrant agricultural workers: we are losing them not only through the lack of freedom of movement but because this chaotic Brexit has ensured that they earn less money when they come here.

I have probably visited all the farms in my area on several occasions, as well as some in the constituency of the hon. Member for Angus, and I have found an incredible melting pot of people from different cultures and nationalities who come to Scotland to sample a different experience. Over the years, we have seen people enjoying the experience of being in Scotland at all sorts of cultural evenings and ceilidhs. Those people are the brightest and best of their countries. We think of them just as fruit pickers, but they are the students who will soon have their own hard-earned euros. We want to give them a positive experience so that they will come back to Scotland to spend them. That is soft power at its very best. Seasonal agricultural workers are good for the producer, good for the migrants who come here, good for the local communities and good for our nation. Minister, sort it out!

I have the James Hutton Institute in my constituency, and it does fantastic work to ensure that our crops—mainly raspberries and strawberries, but also potatoes—are more resilient, productive and pest-resistant. The people who work there are primarily European, and they are thinking about going away. Why would they stay in a country that is telling them that they are the source of all its problems and ills, and whose defining priority is to ensure that people like them stop coming here? Why would they continue to work here when they have transferable skills and could go elsewhere, where they would be made to feel much more welcome? From the field to the laboratory, we are dependent on that labour, and that is what we are putting at risk.

I have only one message for the Minister, because we have debated this time and again; get it sorted. Put forward a scheme so that we can go back to our farmers and tell them that there will be something in place that will allow them to harvest their crop. Some 750 tonnes of Scottish soft fruit production is dependent on the Minister doing the right thing. Otherwise, we could end up in a situation in which, despite having one of the best peak season. Businesses need to know in order to plan for next season. The NFU has put forward strong and, to my mind, compelling arguments for a Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme.

But he stopped there; he did not commit to taking any action.

The only commitment that the Government have given is that “the Migration Advisory Committee is looking into it.” That is not good enough, because the MAC will not report until September, after the end of this year’s peak season. Businesses need to know in order to plan for next season. Also, the report of the MAC’s investigation is very broad, so there is no guarantee that seasonal migrant workers will be central to its recommendations, or that it will find in favour of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme. Even if it does, how much longer will it take for the Government to implement it?

Other sectors are also reliant on seasonal migrant workers, such as hospitality, tourism and care work, to name a few. We have just gone through a winter crisis. The national health service is turning away desperate staff because Britain has hit the cap on skilled visas for the third month in a row. Cambridge University Hospitals states that the cap has prevented it recruiting three doctors—two for intensive care and one specialist in liver and pancreatic surgery. We need certainty for many different sectors, and a long-term solution to labour shortages in the UK’s most important industries.

Labour will not let British farmers go under because of factional infighting and arbitrary immigration targets. Our approach to Brexit will be for jobs and prosperity first. Labour is for fair rules and reasonable management of migration. We will design our immigration policy based on the needs of the economy. We will not do what this Government are doing and say, “This is our immigration policy,” and then work out afterwards what that means for the economy.

2.55 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I can assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I will keep my remarks brief, following your wise words.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on opening the debate, and all other Members who have contributed to it. There is clearly a consensus that the Government need to take urgent action. Labour would take decisive action to reinstate the seasonal agricultural workers scheme. We would put jobs and prosperity at the centre of our approach to Brexit. We would not sacrifice crops and British farming businesses in order to please factions of the Conservative party.

Farming and agriculture have the most pressing need for seasonal migrant workers. The Association of Labour Providers estimates that between 90% and 95% of seasonal workers in food processing and agriculture are from other EU countries, mainly Romania and Bulgaria. The sector is already having difficulty finding labour to meet its needs. Even before we voted to leave the EU, businesses were calling for the Government to act to address the labour shortage. A report by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee found that:

“The current problem is in danger of becoming a crisis if urgent measures are not taken to fill the gaps in labour supply.”

The Committee was also concerned that the Government did not seem to recognise the scale of the problem.

In his speech to the National Farmers Union, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs finally acknowledged the extent of the problem, but he did not commit the Government to doing anything about it. He said:

“It’s already the case that the supply of labour from EU27 countries is diminishing as their economies are recovering and growing... I also understand that you need to see action quickly. Not least to deal with imminent pressures in the year ahead. The NFU has put forward strong and, to my mind, compelling arguments for a Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme.”

But he stopped there; he did not commit to taking any action.

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3 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing this debate. I pay tribute to her for the eloquent way in which she made her points. I have absolutely no doubt that her constituents have an extremely effective representative in this House.
I am grateful, too, for all the other speeches we heard this afternoon. There has been a great deal of consensus, as the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) rightly pointed out. We have had a series of well-informed contributions, although early on I felt that I should perhaps have had lunch first, given the wide variety of produce we got to hear about. I thank the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) for reminding me that today is the first day of spring.

This Government place great value on the UK’s food and farming industries. We recognise them as crucial to the UK economy and to the fabric of rural Britain. Let me be clear that I say that both as a representative of the Government and in a personal capacity. The constituency I have the honour to represent covers 162 square miles, and I reassure the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who yelled from a sedentary position, “You need to get out into the fields”, that I certainly do so in my constituency. I am astonished to hear that he was in the House when the seasonal agricultural workers scheme was originally introduced, as that happened in 1945. He is clearly ageing extremely well.

My constituency is far smaller than the constituency of Angus, but it is still large and has sizeable rural areas, so I am very aware of the role that the farming community plays in shaping the rural economy and preserving the countryside—to say nothing of the vital role it performs in putting food on our plates.

As hon. Members know, this week the Government published “Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit”. I am delighted to have the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), here with me this afternoon, and he will no doubt concur that we want to see a more dynamic and more self-reliant agriculture industry as we continue to compete internationally, supplying products of the highest quality to the domestic market and increasing our exports. Alongside that, we want a reformed agricultural and land management policy to deliver a better and richer environment in our country.

As we have heard, there is a huge opportunity for UK agriculture to improve its competitiveness by developing the next generation of food and farming technology. I reassure hon. Members that their comments about automation in soft fruit picking have not fallen on deaf ears—I am very conscious that huge parts of the sector are reliant on arduous manual labour.

We want to help attract more of our graduates and domestic workforce into this vibrant industry. Importantly, the White Paper also addresses the issue of apprenticeships. We will create more apprenticeships, widen participation and create progression for apprentices. Our reforms will help meet the skills needs of employers by putting them in control and enabling them to work with education providers to develop their workforce now and in the future. We heard that message from across the House. My hon. Friends the Members for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), all mentioned the need to make working in the sector more attractive to our young people.

We have heard much this afternoon about the UK’s exit from the European Union and the issues that that brings for the labour force. The Government have been very clear from the start that our first priority is to safeguard the position of the 3 million EU citizens already in the UK and of the British citizens living in Europe. The practical consequence is that all EU citizens currently working in the UK, whether they are fruit pickers or farm managers, can stay and settle in the UK if they so choose.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear in her Florence speech last year, it is our intention that, for around two years after we leave, EU citizens will still be able to come and go to work in any capacity with a registration system, so there will be no cliff edge for employers. Only yesterday, we set out what the rules will be for those who arrive during the implementation period, so that individuals planning to live, study or work in the UK after March 2019 will know what the arrangements will be if they want to stay for longer than two years. It is crucial to business that those arriving during the implementation period will have certainty that they can stay for the long term.

We have clearly stated throughout the negotiations that we value EU citizens and the contribution they make to the economic, social and cultural fabric of the UK. Our offer is that those EU citizens and their family members who arrive, are resident and have registered during the implementation period will be eligible, after the accumulation of five years’ continuous and lawful residence, to apply for indefinite leave to remain. That was an issue that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) raised.

For the time being, the UK remains a member of the European Union, with all the rights and obligations that membership entails. Employers in the agricultural and food processing sectors, and elsewhere, are free to continue to recruit EU workers to meet their labour needs. This debate is very timely, in that it follows the publication last week by the Office for National Statistics of two important sets of numbers. The first were the quarterly net migration statistics, which show that although the rate of European net migration has slowed, it is still positive. The ONS figures indicated that in the year ending September 2017 there were 90,000 more EU citizens in the UK than there were a year earlier. Secondly, the ONS published the labour force statistics, which demonstrate that in the period October to December 2017 there were 100,000 more EU citizens in the UK labour force than there were a year earlier, including 79,000 more Romanians and Bulgarians. Of course, I appreciate that there is a difference between established workers and seasonal workers of the kind who predominate in agriculture, but it is important that we recognise that there are many EU citizens in the UK and that there are more than there were at the time of the referendum.

In 2013, the last seasonal agricultural workers scheme was abolished, on the independent advice of the MAC. We know that since then the agricultural sector has been working hard to recruit the labour it requires. The hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned an important aspect of this—the treatment and condition of workers who come over to this country. It is important that we continually have an eye to modern slavery, that we look at the conditions in which people are living and that they are paid the minimum wage. In an important part of the review that we undertook with Matthew Taylor,
he emphasised the need to make sure that employees had good conditions and indeed had payslips. That remains a priority for the Home Office.

We recognise the concerns raised by Members from across the House about labour shortages. That is one reason why we have commissioned the MAC to conduct a review of the UK labour market’s reliance on EU labour and the read-across to the industrial strategy. I know that the MAC has received many submissions from within the agricultural sector and from DEFRA—I say that to reassure the hon. Member for Bristol East. They will weigh heavily in the MAC’s deliberations and recommendations. My door is always open to representations, and Home Office officials regularly meet representatives from all sectors of the economy, from business and from academia—

Pete Wishart rose—

Caroline Nokes: Given that many Members took a great deal of time, I am not going to take any interventions.

I also assure Members that we keep the situation under constant review, referring specifically to a seasonal agricultural workers scheme. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs made that point clearly when he addressed the National Farmers Union conference last week. That applies equally to all sectors of the economy. We have heard a little this afternoon about tourism and other sectors that might also be affected.

This Government are determined to get the best deal for the UK in our negotiations to leave the EU, including for our world-leading food and farming industry. In the meantime, we will continue to support the industry, to work with it and to review the situation going forward. I would like the industry to be assured that it has friends in government. I look forward to discussing these issues again and to keeping the recommendations under close review, and I will be appearing shortly before the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, when I am sure this matter will be raised—

Pete Wishart rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman can see that the Minister does not intend to take an intervention. [Interruption.] Order. He knows that he cannot make points from a sedentary position. He has already made his points and the Minister has heard them.

Caroline Nokes: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also heard you when you exhorted people to keep their contributions short. The hon. Gentleman has made many contributions from a sedentary position, some of which I have even deigned to answer. As I said, I will look forward to continuing to discuss these matters with colleagues across government and to making sure that the views of the agricultural sector, which have been expressed so effectively by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus, continue to be heard. I conclude by, again, thanking all Members for speaking and thanking my hon. Friend for initiating this debate.

3.10 pm

Kirstene Hair: The contributions of all Members on both sides of the Chamber and from throughout our entire country have provided a hugely insightful and powerful case for our seasonal migrant workforce. The passion for the British farming industry is palpable. I know that many other Members wished to contribute today but were stopped in their tracks by the weather conditions.

I am delighted at the Minister’s positive remarks about securing the future of our soft fruit and veg industry in the ongoing changing conditions. In my view, the arguments are clear and the solution is clear. I shall continue to urge the Government to carry on their work to ensure that farmers are supported and to end this unnecessary tortuous wait for a system to be implemented. We desperately need British produce to be available on supermarket and shop shelves at a price that is affordable. As I have said before and will say again, I will continue this campaign until I get the outcome that I believe the British farmers want and the migrant workers deserve, and I will do so for Angus and for the whole United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House recognises that seasonal migrant workers make a substantial and positive impact on the UK economy; believes that easy access to seasonal migrant workers is vital for economic prosperity; and calls on the Government to bring forward proposals to allow businesses to continue to access seasonal migrant workers from EU and non-EU countries.
Future of ATMs

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—[Wendy Morton.]

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am delighted to rise to speak on an issue that I am tempted to say affects all constituencies throughout the country: the future of automated teller machines and their provision to our constituents.

By way of introduction, I should say that this debate was triggered by LINK—the body that co-ordinates most of the ATM network and sets the rules for ATM providers—which has proposed and confirmed changes to its interchange fees, following a rather flimsy four-week internal consultation with its bank and ATM-provider members. The core of the proposal is that LINK will reduce its interchange fees by 20% over a four-year period, from 25p to 20p per transaction. The first 5% reduction—from 25p to 23.75p—is set to take place on 1 July this year. Interchange fees will then fall by another 5% on 1 January next year, with a further 5% reduction in fees expected again in January 2020 and again in 2021.

Concerns have been expressed by Members from all parties and by organisations as diverse as Which? and the Federation of Small Businesses. More importantly, because they are key to the network, ATM machine providers—companies such as Cardtronics—have made significant representations to us. This issue is potentially so serious that the Treasury Committee has been hearing evidence on it. In a statement on 31 January, the Chair of that Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), said:

"Any significant reduction in free access to cash would be an unacceptable outcome. This will be the first major test for the Payment Systems Regulator. They must ensure that customers do not lose out as a result of LINK's proposals." I shall return to the PSR in a moment or two.

LINK's proposal comes against the backdrop of significant bank closures, an issue that is often seen through the prism of a rural telescope, but which also affects larger market towns, suburban areas and large city centres. The cri de coeur usually goes up from the banks, as they reduce their estate, of the need to use digital banking. That is an easy solution for very many people and indeed it is very popular—I use it myself—but in rural areas where broadband speed is not as fast as it needs to be and mobile telephone signals might not be strong enough to enable people to log on to banking services, our banks have been very much at the heart of communities, socially and commercially. With their closures, access to cash through ATMs becomes even more pivotal. There was the flimsy consultation by LINK of its members, who clearly have the whip hand, but there was precious little, if any, identifiable engagement with or consultation of consumers in our communities. I am happy to stand corrected, but I believe nothing came through to Members of Parliament suggesting what LINK might be doing.

Reliance on ATMs grows. I know that the Treasury and my hon. Friend the Minister, who I welcome to his place and with whom I have discussed this issue, believe that the use of cash is decreasing. I am sure that he will give us the up-to-date statistics on that, as there is a trend in that direction. The death of cash has long been predicted, but has never actually come about. It has declined by about 34% in the past decade or so, but there is still a need for cash. I am tempted to say that, disproportionately, the need is among our older people—65% of my constituents in North Dorset are over the age of 70—and those on low or fixed incomes who find managing their weekly budgets much easier via cash transactions than merely by contactless payments or by using some other form of card.

Access to the cash that ATMs dispense clearly provides for a social and financial inclusion agenda. You do not have to take my word for it, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is amazing when people turn up whom one vaguely knew at university. A friend of mine from university days—yes, I can remember that far back—happens to be the chief cashier at the Bank of England. Victoria Cleland is quoted in The Guardian—I was given this quote, as The Guardian is not the newspaper of choice necessarily in the Hoare household—saying that the predictions of the death of cash are premature and that "cash is definitely here to stay." When the chief cashier herself says "I personally don't really use contactless", that perhaps says something about the over-reliance of some of our service providers on technology, as they neglect the fact that not all our constituents, including the chief cashier of the Bank of England, feel terribly comfortable using it.

I am very grateful for the submissions that I have received from the Association of Convenience Stores. It does not support the LINK decision. It represents 33,500 convenience stores, and in rural constituencies such as mine where the out-of-town shopping mall and the large superstore is not common, such stores provide not only a retail function but will often host an ATM as well.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I know that the turnout today reflects not the importance of the debate, but the weather. Does he share my concerns about the comments of the chief executive of LINK who went on record before Christmas in the Daily Telegraph, saying that cash machines will largely disappear, and completely disappear in rural areas? Is that not an odd comment from the chief executive of LINK, which is charged with a public service remit to protect cash?

Simon Hoare: It is not only odd; it is both perverse and totally contrary to the expectations of the regulator and the duties that LINK ascribes to itself. I will come in a moment to the role of the Government, particularly the Treasury, in this issue. There is a real danger of constituents being caught in a pincer movement between competing business and commercial interests. There are duties or expectations of the regulator, but it has no real teeth to deliver. If the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I hope to come to that in a moment or two.

The Association of Convenience Stores does not support LINK's decision. It has raised a number of issues, including bank closures, saying that the withdrawal of ATMs has increased the role that ATM providers and convenience stores play in providing consumers with access to cash.

Of course, ATMs hosted in convenience stores and other retail outlets also provide benefits to the high street and other shopping parades by providing access
to cash to facilitate consumer spending. Wanting, quite
properly, local money to be spent locally is one of the
major arguments deployed by the Federation of Small
Businesses with regard to its concerns.

LINK has suggested that retailers could fill the gaps
in the ATM network through cashback services. Again,
in theory it is probably right. However, the practice of a
one or two-man shop—or, indeed, a one or two-woman
shop—in an isolated rural setting holding enough cash
not just to deal with transactions, but to hand money to
people on a cashback basis totally neglects the impact
of the insurance premiums that those retailers would
have to incur, often in marginal retail businesses. That is
not to mention the security concerns of staff working in
those shops at a time when rural policing is not of a
high visible profile. It seems a rather dangerous premise
on which to base a strategy.

I am very grateful for the support of 41 colleagues
from across the country and across this House who
wrote to Hannah Nixon, the managing director of the
Payment Systems Regulator, who has been both punctilious
and courteous in her dealings with me. We outlined our
concerns in our letter of 29 January, highlighting the
potential disproportionate impact on rural areas, although
we did not limit our concerns only to rural areas. Again,
I thank Hannah Nixon for her promptness, as she
replied on 31 January. Her response gave some comfort,
but not enough.

I urge the Treasury Bench to think about these things.
I appreciate and understand that we want a light touch
when it comes to regulation, but a light touch does not
mean contactless. A light touch does not mean that we
just pull away and let things evolve as is seen fit. Indeed,
a number of concerns have been expressed, particularly
by the providers of the machines, in relation to what
happened across the pond in the United States. LINK
here has predicated its decision to reduce the interchange
fee primarily—or certainly in great part—because of
changes in the market by other providers, such as Visa.
We always used to say that when the United States coughs,
20 years later we will probably get the cold. The race to
the bottom in reducing overheads through the interchange
fee in the United States has led to a significant reduction
in the provision of ATMs and in access to cash, often
for the poorest American citizens. Let us learn from
that example. Let us be alert to it.

I return to the letter of 31 January from Ms Nixon.
Two words cause me some concern. She tells me and the
other MPs who signed the letter that the Payment
Systems Regulator has made
“clear to LINK what we expect”
and that,
“Promoting the interests of users is one of our statutory
objectives”.
I am tempted to say that promoting is good, but
protecting—looking for—would be better; and
demanding and ensuring, rather than expecting, would
give us more cause for comfort.

Sturminster Newton is a very pretty market town in
my constituency that saw its last bank close last year.
That has been sad. It has had a huge impact on residents
and on businesses within the town. My very good
friends Andrew Donaldson and Chris Spackman—excellent
town councillors and diligent local public servants—have
been trying to fill the gap that this has created. The
town does have a couple of ATMs, but their capacity is
small in terms of the volume of cash they can hold, and
one of them has very poor reliability. They were just on
the cusp, with Cardtronics, of delivering a new ATM for
the town. We should bear it in mind that when Lloyds
had its ATM, it was dispensing £180,000 per week,
rising to about £200,000 when big events were going on,
such as the annual cheese festival.

Councillor Spackman contacted Cardtronics and was
put in touch with its EU corporate director. Very helpfully,
it was going to come and deliver a new ATM, but that
was pulled, citing
“recent proposed reductions to the Link transaction fees”
which
“had reduced the viability of our ATM making it uneconomic
for them”—
that is, Cardtronics. He said that he
“doubted any other operator would be interested in installing an
ATM in Sturminster Newton”
and that as a result
“there would be ‘cash deserts’ in rural areas”.
Sturminster Newton is quite a small town of about
4,500 people. However, the rural catchment—I declare
an interest as it includes the town that my wife and I
look to for service provision—has about 18,000 people.
Therefore, 18,000 people in a sparsely populated rural
area now have real difficulty in getting hold of cash.

I have tabled a number of parliamentary questions,
and I am grateful for the answers that my hon. Friend
the Minister has given. I drew particular comfort from a
letter I received on 7 February from my hon. Friend
the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) in his capacity as
Economic Secretary to the Treasury. He says in the
third paragraph:
“I know you have an interest in this issue. The Government has
always aligned with MPs on the question of continued widespread
free access to cash, and made it clear to LINK that while
sustainability of the ATM network is important, it must not put
this access at risk.”

So the Treasury Committee, consumer organisations
such as Which? and the Association of Convenience
Stores, very many Members of Parliament, Cardtronics
as a representative of the ATM providers, and my hon.
Friend the Economic Secretary are drawing together a
coalition of interest and concern to ensure access to
banking and access to cash through the ATM network.
I have sat and listened to, and read, submissions from
LINK, Cardtronics, and others. Earlier this week, there
was a very useful event upstairs in one of the Committee
Rooms where both organisations were able to make
presentations, and information has been submitted by
the regulator.

I ask the Government to accept this point: while the
use of cash is on the decline, its death has been greatly
exaggerated. Technology will not always fill the gap,
and cash will always provide a very important mainstay
in our economic and retail life. Against that backdrop,
the regulator clearly has a remit, and LINK has an
aspiration. The Minister represents Newark, a constituency
that in its size and demographic is probably not that
dissimilar from my own, and indeed from that of many
other Members. I see that his Parliamentary Private
Secretary is my hon. Friend the Member for North
Cornwall (Scott Mann), whom I have no doubt has
similar issues in his constituency.
I encourage the Minister not to take a laid-back approach to this. We must hold people to account and ensure that the regulator has the confidence to be as muscular as possible. The current trend that the regulator and LINK seem to have of retrospective review and analysis of how these things have panned out is not good enough and is not giving comfort to me, as the Member of Parliament for North Dorset, to many colleagues across the House and to our constituents that we are looking out for their interests and seeking to preserve their access to a robust and reliable ATM network.

3.30 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick):

May I begin by wishing you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and other hon. Members a happy St David’s day? As the subject of today’s debate is cash and its availability, I wish the same to the staff of the Treasury’s Royal Mint in snowy Llantrisant today. I had the pleasure of visiting them last month for the appointment of the Royal Mint’s first ever female deputy master and chief, Anne Jessopp. Anne is the first woman to hold that post since the Mint was founded in 886 AD. It has taken just over 1,000 years, but a woman is now finally in charge at the Mint, and as my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) said, a woman is the chief cashier at the Bank of England.

One of Anne Jessopp’s first tasks as deputy master of the Mint was to launch the 50p piece that the Mint has created for the 100th anniversary of female suffrage. Unfortunately, although those coins are available online at www.royalmint.com and can be purchased by visiting the Royal Mint, not many of them will enter circulation. That is because there is limited demand for new coinage. Therefore, the Mint, over the course of this year, is unlikely to require new 50ps. Therein lies part of the heart of today’s debate: the use of coinage and notes is in decline, and digitisation is transforming the way we use cash and spend money, as it is every other aspect of our lives.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. The relatively few Members who were able to join us today due to the poor weather is no reflection of the importance of this issue to either the Government or Members of Parliament. First and foremost, I want to assure Members that the Government recognise the importance of widespread access to free cash, and we will do everything we can, with the industry, the regulators and LINK, to ensure that access is maintained.

I want to address three areas, which I hope will allay some of the concerns that my hon. Friend raised and speak to how important this is to the Government. The Treasury and I personally will be following this extremely closely as it develops in the months and years to come.

First, as my hon. Friend laid out well, the increasing digitisation that we are experiencing across society is having a major impact on cash. It has been important already, and I think its impact will be quite profound in years to come. That plays into a wider debate that the Treasury is interested in and in which all parts of Government have to engage, which is how we can embrace the new and ensure that the United Kingdom makes the most of new technology and does not shy away from it. We cannot stop the world and get off it, but we have to protect the vulnerable in society and ensure that the benefits of new technology work for all people in all parts of the United Kingdom, whether in great cities such as London or in rural areas such as Dorset, Nottinghamshire, Cornwall and the others represented here today.

The use of cash has fallen from 62% of all payment volumes in 2006 to 40% in 2016, the last year for which we have reliable figures, and it is predicted that, by 2026, it will make up just 21% of all our payments. As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, however, claims that we will move any time soon to a completely cashless society are off the mark. The use of cash—both coinage and notes—will continue to decline significantly in the years ahead, but it seems unlikely that any of us will live in a country without any form of cash. That poses an important challenge to Government on how we can manage this period of transition in a way that works for everyone.

Cash remains extremely important in the day-to-day lives of UK consumers and businesses. It is still the form of payment that the UK public reach for the most, and 5% of the adult population rely either entirely or almost entirely on cash to make all their day-to-day payments. Many of them, of course, are the most vulnerable, the most financially excluded and the most elderly members of society.

To provide free access to cash, the UK has one of the most extensive free-to-use ATM networks in the world. Compared with our major international competitors, including the United States, our network is extensive and generally free, and those are important things that we want to continue. There are more ATMs in the UK than ever before, about 54,000 of which are free to use, which represents an increase of 50% in the past decade alone.

Ged Killen: Is not the Minister concerned that the LINK decision on the interchange fee might reverse free access to cash? The problem is that LINK is relying on the ATM operators themselves to tell it when cash machines are no longer financially viable. Is it not the case that many machines may already have closed after the event?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, which I hope I will be able to answer over the course of my speech. One of the motivations for LINK was the industry’s action plan to reduce the number of ATMs in those areas with the greatest density, including cities such as London, but their pledge to the Government and to consumers, which I will go on to talk about, is that that will not be to the detriment of those in rural areas, market towns or harder-to-serve areas, which are not exclusively rural but could be areas of greater deprivation, even in cities such as London. We have had a fairly strong promise from LINK and from the regulator that there will be no detriment to rural areas. I will come on in a moment to how that will be enforced in practice.

We all recognise that there is a decline in the use of cash, which is making it harder to maintain our current level of free access to cash. That is the challenge that the changes hope to address. I appreciate that we have to view the issue through the lens of bank branch closures, which affects my constituents and those of most Members across the House. The Government, the financial services industry and the regulator therefore have to act to ensure that the needs of the consumer continue to be met. My comments, on behalf of the Government, represent consumers, not the regulator...
or LINK. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset is absolutely right that we in this House represent the consumers, and their interests must be our primary concern.

Secondly, I wish to address exactly how we do that, which brings me to the particular role played to date by the Payment Systems Regulator and the role it will play in the future, if it lives up to the Government’s expectations. In November, LINK—the main payment scheme behind the UK’s ATM network—launched a consultation on reducing interchange fees by 20%. As I have said, that was designed to reduce the duplication of cash machines in city centres while protecting the more isolated machines. That is the organisation’s stated objective, to which we will hold it to account. At the time, the Government and many Members of this House were clear that any changes must not have a harmful impact on consumers. If machines are lost in cities, the impact should be generally imperceptible, and if they are lost in rural and harder-to-serve areas, they should be replaced, wherever possible.

Simon Hoare: I agree with my hon. Friend about the overprovision of ATMs in a city centre environment, but I just want to make sure that he is alert to the fact that ATM providers—the Cardronics of this world—often use the moneys they secure from such machines to subsidise rural provision. In effect, they are cross-accounting. The opportunity to use that cross-subsidy spare fund will, in effect, disappear as a result of a diminution of ATMs in large cities. That is one of the big problems.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend raises an important point to which the regulator must pay close attention, but it estimates that the impact of the changes will be modest, even in city centres with a heavy density of ATMs. The main operators of card machines—the companies he mentioned earlier—are generally financially successful. This industry has more than £1 billion of revenue a year, and its market caps are between £500 million and £1.5 billion. Generally speaking, these sizable businesses are in sound financial health. There is no reason to believe that the changes will alter that, although the regulator must bear that factor in mind.

The PSR, which the Government established to deal with such difficult issues, has taken the lead in examining the area. It has engaged with LINK and held a consultation. My hon. Friend raised concerns about the scope of that consultation, but the PSR believes that it has engaged with MPs, although perhaps not as much as it could have done. It has spoken to a number of different parties across the country—and, indeed, future consultations could learn lessons from the number of individuals and parties to whom it chose to reach out.

The PSR has come back with three requirements that LINK’s proposals must fulfill. First, there is a commitment by LINK to do “whatever it takes”—we must remember those words—to protect the broad geographical spread of free-to-use ATMs. Secondly, any cuts in the interchange must be incremental, and at just 5% in the first year. There will be a review after one year, so in July next year there will be a review before the next cut of 5% could, or would, be implemented. I have received assurances from LINK and the PSR that no further cuts will take place unless they are satisfied that there has been no significant material detriment to the rural and harder-to-serve areas. Thirdly, there will be a greater than ever focus on financial inclusion, and LINK will continue filling gaps in the network and protecting those ATMs in areas that are harder to serve.

LINK will maintain all free-to-use ATMs that are a kilometre or more from the next or nearest free-to-use ATM, including where a community loses ATM access because of a branch closure. LINK will increase the subsidy for ATMs in areas with poor cash access to keep free-to-use machines going. It will conduct an annual review not just in the first year but, if the changes continue, every year thereafter. That review will consider the impact of the interchange fee reduction on the provision of free-to-use ATMs as phased in over the four-year period, and take action as and when required.

LINK has promised to place a page on its website from 1 July that will have sufficient specificity for every Member of the House to look at its constituency. It will show every free ATM across the country, so MPs will be able to view availability in their part of the world. The website will highlight any areas where free ATM availability is in danger of being lost and state what action is being taken to tackle that. For example, my hon. Friend will be able to look up the ATM that we have heard about in his constituency and see whether it is in danger and what action is being taken to address that. That is important to ensure that MPs and people across the country—including those local councillors who were mentioned—can continue to monitor and ensure that LINK lives up to its promises.

Finally, the way that the PSR will police LINK’s commitments can, and should, be stringent. We set the PSR up in 2015 with a specific statutory objective to ensure that the interests of the users of payment systems—not those of the banks—are promoted, with robust powers to enforce that. We expect the PSR to step in and act if needed. I have spoken to the PSR and to LINK, and the PSR understands the importance that the Government place on free access to cash, and the strength of feeling in Parliament and the country. Both organisations have made an explicit commitment to do whatever it takes to maintain the network and provide an additional subsidy per ATM at whatever level is required, to ensure that any machine that is in danger of being lost is replaced by another within a reasonable distance.

In conclusion, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset for raising this important issue that affects my constituents and people across the country. I have been assured by LINK and the PSR that the motivation for these changes is to ensure that the proliferation of ATMs in urban areas is sustainable, and that we continue to have a free-to-use ATM network—an important issue for the whole country and one that sets it apart from many others—but not at the cost of harder-to-serve areas: the rural areas and the market towns. The promise made to me by LINK is that it will do whatever it takes. The pledge has been made to me by the regulator that it will robustly hold LINK to account for that. The Treasury and I will be watching both very hard to ensure that those pledges are fulfilled on behalf of the people of the country.

Question put and agreed to.

3.45 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 February 2018

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

UK Basketball

9.30 am

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of basketball in the UK.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Bailey. I am delighted that the Backbench Business Committee has given us an opportunity to debate the future of basketball at such an important juncture for the sport. It is five years since this place last had a chance to discuss this hugely popular sport.

There are three main areas of the sport and different organisations leading and governing them, as befits a game played by so many in this country. To put it simply, we have the grassroots sport, which is overseen by Basketball England, Basketball Wales and Basketball Scotland, looking after all the amateur clubs, from juniors right up to the semi-professional national basketball league. We have the professional club game for adults, which is overseen by the British Basketball League and Women's British Basketball League. In my constituency, we have Leeds Force, who are the newest team in the British Basketball League. I know that many other hon. Members are in attendance because they have WBBL or BBL teams locally; just like all sports fans, we are here to support our teams. Finally, we have the elite, international top of the sport, which is made up of the eight Great Britain teams, both male and female, playing in age groups and at adult level, and overseen by the British Basketball Federation. This is GB Basketball.

I pay particular tribute to the women's team, who beat both Portugal and Israel last week on the road, to jointly top their EuroBasket qualifying group with Greece, one of the pre-eminent basketball nations, which finished fourth at the last EuroBasket event, in 2017. Some of those top players are here today, as I am sure people will not have failed to notice: Stef Collins, GB women's captain; Eilidh Simpson and Bev Kettlety, the team manager. Those women's futures are at stake, as are the futures of their male counterparts, of all the boys and girls playing in the national age groups, and of all the boys and girls in the clubs out there who dream of one day putting on a Team GB jersey—in other words, all those who think that they have a future in basketball and that our great country will sustain their dream of one day playing for their national team. The more immediate future concerns those women present here today and their dreams of finishing the qualifiers and competing at the 2019 EuroBasket championships, where they have a brilliant chance of taking GB to its highest ever placing in the competition.

Minister, let us not be remembered for throwing an air ball; let us do what is right for basketball and shoot dunk the ball right into the hoop for our GB players. At the moment, the ball is in the hands of UK Sport, and I am concerned that it is double dribbling with its decision not to fund GB Basketball. I see an opportunity for the Minister to make an offensive turnover, and her assist could provide the opportunity for British basketball to score the winning three-pointer that sees those women through to EuroBasket in Serbia and Latvia in 2019 and all the other GB teams continuing to compete in their competitions, thereby maintaining the dreams of young people to play at the highest level.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this hugely important debate. On the point about dreams, does he recognise the point made to me by Tyler Gayle, who wrote to me on behalf of Sheffield Hatters, our women's basketball team, and said that the sport of basketball is one of the most effective at reaching out to deprived communities? Is that not a particularly important reason that it should continue to be supported?

Alex Sobel: My hon. Friend's area has two great basketball teams: Sheffield Hatters and Sheffield Sharks. People in disadvantaged communities in Sheffield, Leeds, London and other urban centres, aspire to play for such teams and, one day, for our national team, so his point is spot on. My constituent Tricia McKinney, knowing that this debate was scheduled to take place, wrote to me on a similar point. Her son represented England and played for Sheffield Sharks, in my hon. Friend's constituency, and her daughter and four grandchildren are involved with clubs in Leeds. She said:

"I see first hand the physical and social benefits 'of being involved'. All the facts and figures show that basketball provides opportunities for adults and children from diverse ethnic backgrounds and both genders to participate in sport. It is a particularly important sport for those in deprived communities."

That echoes my hon. Friend's point.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate. Does he agree that local basketball involving colleges, schools and other organisations, such as John Leggott College and Leggott Academy, is so important and, indeed, key to helping to grow the grassroots of this very important game?

Alex Sobel: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely apt point, which leads me to my next point. My constituent Baile Beyai wrote to me:

"I'm currently studying Politics at Leeds University and Basketball was a big, big reason that I had the self-esteem to even attempt to study at university, especially growing up as a problem child"—those are his words—"in a 'disadvantaged' area of London. So thank you; it's an inspiration that you're commandeering these efforts as I doubt even you know how much impact it has on kids, especially ethnic minorities in low income families. We face a much... bigger dropout than other sports and more funding would definitely improve the chances of young children playing the sport. Growing up I was jumping trains to go to England Basketball trials and sessions by myself, and remember at age 16 I was forced to skip the regional competition because I just didn't have the £120 to pay for hotels. I doubt such constraints are put on children who've been selected to a high level of competition in other sports."

Minister, do we really want our inner-city kids driven to petty criminality in order to follow their dreams, or to abandon their dreams, as they cannot pay for hotels?

UK Sport recently announced £226 million for Olympic eligible sports until 2021. That includes £14.5 million for equestrian sports, £25.5 million for sailing and more than £6 million for modern pentathlon—a sport that...
[Alex Sobel]

requires a horse, a sword and a gun. None of those sports is within reach of the young people we see playing basketball. We are funding elite sports for elites.

Temi Fagbenle, who top scored for GB in last week’s win against Israel, started playing in Haringey. That ultimately led her to a scholarship at Harvard University and a contract in the Women’s National Basketball Association, where she plays for Minnesota.

Last week, Temi said:

“I feel...they are literally trying to rip the GB shirts off my and my team-mates’ backs. Just look at the athletes on the basketball teams—a lot of us are from ethnic minorities and/or grew up in working-class households. The youth from these groups, and young people in general, aren’t inspired by obscure sports that are completely alien to them, they are inspired by athletes they can relate with.”

This is the sad reality of where we are. The next game for Temi and the other women players will be in November, but will they be able to play that game and qualify for EuroBasket, as we have heard they are on course to do?

I think it is important, Mr Bailey, that you know the background to how we got here. In 2006, British Basketball was formed, as required by the International Basketball Federation—FIBA—in conjunction with the British Olympic Association, to guide our teams through to London 2012, where we qualified as hosts. Since then, basketball has continued to grow in popularity, with more and more players giving us our best ever base for the future, but funding has eroded and is almost entirely at risk, although our elite teams have continued to improve, especially the women, who finished a best ever ninth at the 2013 EuroBasket tournament. The two main funding bodies in this country are Sport England and UK Sport, but at present our GB teams do not receive funding from UK Sport because basketball does not meet the current performance policy. Sport England provides £4.7 million for the grassroots game in England and allocates £1.4 million for talent, with £150,000 of Sport England’s talent grant in 2018, plus a further indicative investment of up to £150,000 from that talent grant, to ensure that the men’s and women’s under-16, under-18 and under-20 age group teams can compete this summer, but there is nothing for the senior teams.

This temporary reallocation of funds is subject to final approval by Sport England, and I understand that it will be confirmed shortly. Grateful as I am to Sport England, that is not enough to sustain our GB teams, and if no more funding comes forward, we will have to withdraw all our teams. The sum of £1 million a year is enough to sustain all of elite basketball in the UK. The funding that basketball received was equivalent to just £10,000 per player, while so-called—but not guaranteed—podium team sports received £40,000 per player in the old funding regime.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s securing this debate, not least because I wake up every day to the NBA highlights on YouTube as my husband is such a fan. One reason for the great appeal of basketball is that it is a game of the street. That is particularly the case in London, where outdoor courts such as Clapham Common, Turnpike Lane and Bethnal Green can act as a social lubricant for people from all backgrounds. Does the hon. Gentleman therefore agree that we need not just to focus on funding costly leagues and indoor basketball courts, but to get local authorities to fund outdoor courts properly and get proper facilities for people?

Alex Sobel: Absolutely, I am very grateful for the hon. Lady’s point, because I am not going into great depth about facilities, but we absolutely do need facilities, and I will come to the outdoor game later in my speech.

I am sure that most hon. Members think of basketball as a five-player game indoors, but they will also remember the classic movie “White Men Can’t Jump”, starring Woody Harrelson and Wesley Snipes, in which Woody and Wesley play outdoors on a half-court, two on two. That will not quite become an Olympic sport, but if we add a player on each side, it will: 3 on 3 basketball will debut at the Tokyo 2020 games, in just two years’ time, as a full Olympic sport—an Olympic sport eligible for UK Sport funding. No one knows who the medal challengers will be or what our Olympic potential is.

The game 3 on 3 is played in every urban constituency, as the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) has pointed out. In fact, 3 on 3 basketball is the largest urban team sport in the world, according to a study commissioned by the International Olympic Committee. The Netherlands base their youth basketball development programme on the 3 on 3 style of play, and as a result the country is ranked second across all genders and ages. Ball Out 3x3 is pioneering 3 on 3 basketball in the UK and is endorsed by FIBA 3x3. It will deliver the nation’s biggest 3 on 3 tournament this summer. We will become one of the leaders of 3 on 3 if this continues.

In the United States, rapper Ice Cube has teamed up with former NBA stars to launch a 3 on 3 league. Cube said:

“It was to bring a style of basketball that I grew up playing, watching, and loving, which is 3-on-3 basketball.”

That is the same urban sport that our young people play outdoors. As this is the first debate I have led in Westminster Hall, I hope you will indulge me, Mr Bailey, and let me quote from the Ice Cube song, “It Was a Good Day”, which is about a day in south-central Los Angeles, a very urban and difficult area. It was a day without any gang violence, air pollution or police harassment. He raps:

“Which park, are y’all playin’ basketball?
Get me on the court and I’m trouble”.

The game 3 on 3 is global, urban and an Olympic sport. It has a bright future, but we are not even considering its potential for our own programme. UK Sport revealed in its annual review that athletes in para taekwondo, para badminton, sport climbing, karate and BMX freestyle will receive national lottery support, as they enter the Olympic and Paralympic programme for the first time, but not 3 on 3.

GB Basketball wrote to UK Sport in June last year seeking a meeting about a 3 on 3 programme, but a meeting did not take place until January this year. GB Basketball has asked for help, as it needs expertise to research the position of the 3 on 3 game and strategic support for 3 on 3. I am sure that UK Sport will say that GB Basketball did not apply, which is true, but it took six months for UK Sport to engage with GB Basketball, and support was not forthcoming to put in a comprehensive application for Olympic funding. GB Basketball is waiting
for UK Sport to confirm that it will support it in the process. We are missing an opportunity with 3 on 3. However, if we do fund it, we still need to keep our elite basketball teams on the court.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I wholeheartedly agree with many of his points. I have been contacted by many constituents representing Vale Vipers and Cardiff Met Archers, and by Sheridan Ward, whose son Jed has been selected to play for Wales. They are all passionate about this game. I know how much difference it made to kids in the vale when I was growing up. Some of them went off to play in the United States and at the top levels in the UK sport.

Without this funding and support, kids will not have that chance in the future, so I wholeheartedly endorse what my hon. Friend is saying.

Alex Sobel: My hon. Friend hits the nail right on the head. I am grateful for his contribution. Basketball Wales provides valuable support to UK basketball.

On broadcasting, the British Basketball League is not currently able to secure domestic and international broadcast revenues, whereas other European leagues have monetised broadcasting both domestically and internationally. Attendance figures vary throughout Europe, but basketball is clearly a popular spectator sport. BBL’s average stadium capacity is only 2,362—Leeds Force have the smallest arena in the UK—compared with 4,424 in Germany and 6,447 in Spain. The value of France’s domestic broadcasting rights for basketball stands at £8.5 million. The domestic league in Spain is valued at £5.3 million and Germany’s at £0.9 million.

The Perform Media Group—one the world’s largest sports media companies, which holds the BBL media rights—estimates that the level of interest in basketball in the UK stands at 20% of the population. That is one in five people. Similarly, 22% of the population in Germany takes an interest in the game. The figures for France and Spain are 33% and 61% respectively. Much smaller nations, such as Israel, still manage to monetise their league rights to the tune of £1.8 million. The potential audience of 20% in the UK is sizeable. If we can grow the brand appeal of both the national team and the BBL, that will help create a sustainable commercial model for both.

The UK’s domestic fan base is young—we can see that from those present in the Public Gallery—which is extremely important to advertisers. The monetisation of German and Israeli basketball gives us a benchmark for what my hon. Friend is saying.

Our GB games are also not being broadcast, with limited live-streaming opportunities to watch GB games, so how can the British fan base watch our national team and how can our national team move on to monetise their potential? In the medium term, if we can get those broadcasting rights for those games, we can monetise it, but in the short term, that just is not possible.

I hope that the Minister will take on board three recommendations, with which she can score a triple double—a basketball term for scoring 10 or more in three different areas. First, I recommend that sports funds provide a short-term solution for the next three seasons so that GB players can stay on the court. Secondly, post-Tokyo, I recommend that the review of elite funding looks at a wider set of criteria than immediate podium potential and a wider range of socioeconomic factors, including the barriers to elite sport faced by our black, Asian and minority ethnic and disadvantaged communities, linking it to the sports they play. Finally, I would like the Minister to intervene and recommend that UK Sport undertakes an urgent review of the potential of 3 on 3 and that funding is made available for a development programme for a 3 on 3 squad for Tokyo.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I have something like eight Members down to speak. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespersons at 10.30 am at the latest. That works out at approximately five minutes per speaker. I will not impose a time limit at this point, but I will start to get agitation and interrupt after five minutes. Back Benchers should bear that in mind.

9.46 am

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, not least because the national cup champions, Hemel Storm, are in my constituency. I want to talk about two points. I agree completely, looking at aspiration, that there has to be an opportunity for our young boys and girls to start at school, come through the clubs and go on to play for England. If the funding is just about winning at the top all the time, there will never be that transition. While I absolutely agree with the policy of Sport England on elitism, money has to be put to one side to bring the different places through.

I slightly disagree with the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel): it is not all about young people. The average crowd at Hemel Storm—I see here some of the referees that have come to me—is 700. That club started seven years ago. We had a club many years ago; the franchise was bought out, and it went to Milton Keynes. When we restarted the club—I say “we”, because it is completely a community project—we made sure it was set up as a trust, so that it could never be sold off again.

From that moment on, the community came in. We have great-great-grandparents in the audience on a regular basis, and toddlers who cannot even walk. They are mostly not there because of the players. Of course, the
families and loved ones of the players are there, but we could not get those sorts of numbers from only families and loved ones, in a town that has baseball, professional rugby league and three football clubs—I could go on. There is an elite gym where Max Whitlock and Jess Stretton, who won Olympic golds, came from. The crowd is there because it is a community thing. It is us coming together.

When we went to east London, to the Docklands, for the final against Manchester Magic, they never realised what happened to them, because we had 500-plus of our people in the crowd and I think Manchester Magic had about half a dozen, or perhaps fewer than that. I am not saying that that is why Manchester Magic lost; they lost because they were not as good as Hemel Storm—it is as simple as that.

The issues I have heard are not new to me. I have players playing for England at junior level. In the past, I have had families come to me and ask, “Can we help fundraise?” to help these young players come through. Like many colleagues, I have had correspondence from young people with aspirations who want to get up there. They have been selected for the England junior team. Marina Christie and Jack Burnell are both coming through and should be playing for England soon. They have had problems, but the families are brilliant and support them. While I fully support saying that we need to get more help from central funding, if we are really honest with ourselves, basketball needs to come together better across the board, so that we have the structures we need, right from the bottom to the top.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with what the Leicester Riders said to me: basketball has a unique case for funding, because it is not just a sport, but a way to engage disengaged young people? He has been a Minister; he knows about young people who might fall the wrong way. Basketball can be a way to get them back on the right track, as sport generally is for young people.

Sir Mike Penning: I completely agree on the latter point: sport is aspirational. It is one of the great ways forward for people like me, born and bred in north London. I got into the armed forces because I could play rugby pretty well. It was pretty obvious that I would not have got in on my academic abilities, but I boxed and I played rugby pretty well. I did try to play basketball, but it was the wrong shaped ball for me, and they were all up here somewhere, even though I was in the Guards.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) has touched on a very important point. Look at the people in the crowd watching: they are young and old, and from across our community. I am not going to pick on any particular area; at the end of the day, we come together as a community. Interestingly, Hemel Storm have only one overseas player. That is quite remarkable given the progression that we have made, but we simply did not have the money at the time to bring in players from Spain and America; we have one American player now.

We looked at how this could be funded, and we need to look at that all the way through. Look at the sponsorship of Hemel Storm: Epson, an international company; Vanarama, one of the largest leasing companies in the country and sponsors of the Vanarama football league; McDonald’s, interestingly enough, which is genuinely trying to show what it does with its healthy food; and Arriva, which has donated us a bus completely plastered with “Hemel Storm”, which we use when we are away.

Interestingly and importantly, Mr Bailey, when I was at the cup final, I saw absolutely no advertising. There was no marketing and no sponsorship. To me, that is the missing link. We can ask the lottery and Sport England for more money, but we also have to come together in the basketball community to get the sponsorship that we need.

9.52 am

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this debate and very glad that the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) secured it. I should declare two interests: first, the Glasgow Rocks are based in my constituency and play at the Emirates arena, and secondly, one of my caseworkers, Alexander Belic, is a Rocks season ticket holder. The Rocks have gone through a wee bit of history in Scotland. They started as the Edinburgh Rocks in 1998, became the Scottish Rocks, and then in 2008—I was a councillor in Glasgow City Council at the time—we pinched them and lured them over from Renfrewshire to play in Glasgow.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): More on that later!

Alison Thewliss: There will be more on that later from my hon. Friend.

The Rocks have been a huge success story in the city and a great thing to celebrate. I thank the new owner, Duncan Smillie, for his time earlier this week, when he gave me a wee bit more information on them for this debate.

In my constituency, the Emirates arena is a key part of the Commonwealth games legacy in Glasgow. It is a huge arena with great benefits for many sports, particularly basketball. It is very impressive and has a big capacity, so it can put on a great show. Basketball has the benefit of being something that people can do in Scotland indoors during the winter. That is of huge benefit to many people, because it is freezing and raining most of the time, so there is a consistency in being able to play indoors.

We have been able to grow lots of our own talent in Scotland. My son’s favourite player, Jonny Bunyan, joined the 1,000-point club at the weekend, having scored 1,000 points in the British Basketball League championship. That is a good achievement from a Scottish-grown player.

In Scotland, we have also had a good degree of success in securing the grassroots elements of basketball, particularly through Scottish Government funding through the CashBack for Communities scheme. For people who do not know, CashBack for Communities puts money from the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 into grassroots sport. The scheme is in its fourth phase in Scotland. The basketball programme has received £2.1 million over the course of CashBack for Communities, and in this
phase, basketball programmes got a significant £492,800, which will support 16 schools of basketball right across Scotland over the next three years.

The scheme has surpassed its targets: 95 new teams have been established across Scotland, 61% of Basketball Scotland’s membership are young people, and there are 155 registered members playing wheelchair basketball in Scotland. All the clubs that have youth sections in Scotland are also delivering women’s basketball, which is great. There is also an associated education programme, which sees qualifications achieved in partnership with Glasgow Kelvin College. That means the volunteer coaches who come through the programme get accreditation, which is really important, as they can take that on to other parts of their life.

Outreach work in schools, such as the Jump2it programme and Shell Twilight Basketball, run right across Scotland and are absolutely brilliant. At Glasgow Rocks games, the kids who are involved in those programmes come on at half time, which is absolutely great to see. They get to come in front of a huge crowd and have that experience, which is absolutely brilliant.

Shell Twilight Basketball runs in the highlands, Aberdeen, Fife, Dundee, Sterling, Glasgow, North Ayrshire and Stranraer, so it goes right across Scotland and is a really valued programme. It has the impact of youth diversionary activity, which the hon. Member for Leeds North West mentioned. It keeps the kids busy, occupied and healthy, and has that brilliant impact on those communities. It is very much done in partnership, working with local schools. Schools in my constituency see a huge benefit that goes to those Glasgow Rocks players who go into schools across the length and breadth of the country, are very accessible, and make promoting basketball to young people across the country part of their job.

The players’ other partnership work in Glasgow is with Active East, which is the Commonwealth games legacy programme. That has sustained funding, and I hope it will continue to be funded in the years ahead. It has had an impact on local schools. St Mungo’s Academy has a basketball team. At the school’s academic awards, the winner of the basketball MVP—most valuable player—award comes up with everybody else who has won an academic achievement, and is recognised by their peers. It is important that the partnerships between these organisations—Active East, Scottish Sports Futures, the colleges and Basketball Scotland—are in place.

The result of that success is that the Scottish team has qualified for the Commonwealth games for the very first time. That is brilliant, and we are really excited about it. Seven people on that 12-person team are Rocks players. That is an important aspect. The points that the hon. Member for Leeds North West made about losing out on places mean that we might not be able to put that team forward. That would be hugely disappointing, not only for the players, who are desperate to play and represent their country, but for Callan Low, who is only 17 and has been called up. I would be heartbroken if he was not able to take up that place. It is also important for the kids in my constituency to see the players that they have had in their schools, such as 6 foot 10 Kieron Achara, representing Scotland on the Commonwealth stage. I beg the Minister to do something to make sure that the sport is secured for the future.

9.58 am

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): In the words of the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), I am here to support the Ilkeston Outlaws and the Derby Wheelblazers.

The Ilkeston Outlaws were set up in 1966, so have just celebrated half a century. They have gone from strength to strength: they lost their first match against Bestwood A by 121 points to 14, but are now winning, which is really good news. They have eight teams, beginning with boys and girls aged 7 and stretching into senior men and women. That covers something like 120 to 130 people across the community, and it is an amazing way to get people active in sports. However, the club do not receive any funding from the sport’s governing body, Basketball England. The regional body, Derbyshire Basketball Association, does help with some small-scale funding to support them at county tournaments and with coaching and official courses, but in the main, the club is self-funded, and that is probably one of their problems. They have managed to get some sponsorship, like the team mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), from a bus company; but that is just for kit and equipment—they do not have a bus from the bus company.

Sir Mike Penning: Try harder!

Maggie Throup: We will try harder, definitely. Having good kit and being branded provides a sense of community for the players. The bus company sponsors the under-12s squad, and it gives them a sense of purpose and of belonging that is so important.

When it comes to funding for the future, there is a lot more that Ilkeston Outlaws want to do. At the moment, girls must leave after reaching age 12, because there is no pathway for them beyond that. The club could set up a pathway for girls over 12, but it would run at a loss, which the club, as a community group, cannot afford. The school where the under-12s practice has made a great push on “This Girl Can”, but sadly, any girl over 12 cannot. On the other hand, boys can continue. If one looks back at the reports, one can see that some of the people involved in the club in 1966 are still involved. It shows what longevity basketball has. If we get it right at the grassroots, not just for boys but for girls, it can go from strength to strength in future.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am enjoying my hon. Friend’s speech immensely, and I congratulate her team on its success. I do not quite understand why the girls must stop at age 12, while the boys can carry on. Would she be kind enough to explain?

Maggie Throup: That is a good point; my hon. Friend is right that it sounds odd. It is down to numbers. More boys are attracted to basketball at that age, especially in my local community. It is a matter of having the numbers. Long-term, a team for girls over 12 would be self-funding, but there would be a period after set-up before it would become fully funded and viable. It is about getting over that gap.

To look at it from another angle, children who start the right way—by doing sports, getting out and being active, and developing a good body awareness and image—are less likely to eat the wrong things and become...
obese, unlike many of their peer group. We need to look at it not just from a sporting point of view but from a health point of view. If we set them on the right pathway, they will have the right habits for life.

Before I finish, it would be remiss of me not to show my support for Derbyshire wheelchair basketball and our team, Derby Wheelblazers. We have a hub in Erewash that meets at Friesland sport centre in Sandiacre. Wheelchair basketball can be played by anyone: amputees, paraplegics and people with no disabilities whatever all play together. It is good to have that rounded approach.

If we get it right at grassroots level and at a young age, habits will be formed for a lifetime. Who knows? Maybe even more stars will make our country proud.

10.3 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for securing this important debate, and for his excellent and entertaining speech; I do not think that we have heard rap quoted in here before. He recently took over from me as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on basketball, and he is doing a sterling job; he has already done a lot more in that short time than I hoped to do to raise the profile of basketball in Parliament, and this debate is an excellent opportunity to do so.

I have always loved basketball. I know that I do not look like a basketball player—we have lots of them in the Public Gallery—but I played in high school, and I still love to watch the sport; I know that that is hard to believe. I always hoped that through the work of the all-party group, one day the sport would be as large as others, even football, and that it would be everywhere: on our TVs, on the news channels, in our local communities and in our international sports arenas. However, that cannot be achieved unless basketball receives fair and sustainable funding so the sport can grow from the grassroots up.

Basketball is the second most popular sport behind football for 11 to 15-year-olds. According to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, it is more popular than riding a bike, so why does the funding stay so low? All young people could benefit from basketball as a sport. It gets them active, but as shown in the results of the all-party group’s 2014 inquiry, which I chaired, it can also serve as a great tool for representation and aspiration, especially among children from deprived communities.

Basketball is perceived as very cool, and it is. It has street credibility globally, and due to its strong affinity with music and lifestyle, it is a sport that can resonate with young people. It can be played with very little space, equipment and money, making it truly representative. More than 300,000 young people aged 16 and over play basketball at least twice a week. It appeals to men, women, boys and girls—one in six participants are female—and is popular among players from less wealthy backgrounds. Somewhat uniquely, basketball is the only team sport in which more than half of registered members—58% of adult basketball participants—are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. That is followed by cricket, which is still some way behind at about 30%.

We have all plugged our local teams. My local team, the Newcastle Eagles, are absolutely amazing. I do not wish to gloat or be biased, but allow me to remind Members that they are the top team in the British Basketball League, having won the BBL championship seven times and the BBL cup seven times. I was there for some of those games, cheering them on. Not only are the Newcastle Eagles a fantastic team, they do so much work for the local community and hold partnerships with Northumbria University. Little Dribblers, Mini Eagles, Hoops 4 Health and the School of Excellence are just some examples of what the Eagles Community Foundation, launched in 2006, helps to do for the local community. The primary school programme Hoops 4 Health works with 7,000 young people every year, encouraging them to play and get healthy. It is a great way to introduce children to the sport. They can also play in the Eagles’ central venue league on weekends. The Eagles are a great example of what all BBL clubs do, week in and week out.

Despite all that great work, since 2009, basketball nationally has received just £102 in funding per adult participant. That is less than half as much as the next highest comparable sport, netball, which receives £205. Why is that? I know that netball has its own attributes; I used to play when I was younger, although I preferred and was better at basketball. It is cooler, as well. Why must funding be shared so unfairly? Sport England’s February 2017 funding round awarded £4.73 million to Basketball England, and just £1 million to British Basketball. Wheelchair basketball funding was not announced until October 2017, when it received £300,000.

Based on Sport England’s active lives survey, just under 1% of the population—0.7% to be exact—participated in basketball at least twice during the 28 days prior to the survey. Although that might seem like a small percentage, basketball placed 10th out of the top 25 sports by participation—only 8% of participation was in team sports—placing it ahead of other sports such as netball, rugby and hockey. [Interruption.] I will wind up, but before I do, I will make one point about funding. Those sports receive far more funding than basketball. Hockey receives more than £9 million in funding although only 0.3% of the population participate, meaning that hockey receives 50% more funding from Sport England than Basketball England, British Basketball and wheelchair basketball.

I had more that I wanted to say, but others want to participate, and I am being told to wind up, so I will leave it to the Minister to do the sums. I hope that she will consider what is being said today and fix the unfair funding, so that basketball becomes a national sport in this country.

10.9 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) on securing this debate. It seems that we share more than just a love of environmental and co-operative politics. I can be very proud as well, because Plymouth are two places above Leeds in the league table.
Basketball is a sport worthy of our support. It is growing, with more young people getting stuck in every day, and it has low barriers to entry, because all people need is a ball, a hoop and a flat surface. It can change lives.

As a supporter of the mighty Plymouth Raiders—as we know, the sporting hub of the country is Devon—who play at Plymouth Pavilions in my constituency, I know that basketball is fast-paced, family friendly and a great spectator sport that grows every year. It has the opportunity to star as a sport that is embedded in the community by getting young people involved from day one, which is what Plymouth Raiders and Plymouth Storm, the wheelchair basketball side, do with their incredible community work.

Raiders are Plymouth’s only national top-flight sports club and we are very proud of them. They are firmly established in Plymouth’s big three alongside the in-form Plymouth Argyle, who are pushing for the playoffs in league one, and Plymouth Albion, who are fourth in rugby’s national league one.

Home games at the Pavilions are something special. For people who have not been to a basketball game, it is worth going along. It is not like a football game or a rugby game. I have seen Raiders play at the Copper Box at the Olympic park and I was brimming with pride at seeing them play on such a big stage, but there is no place like home. We have Foxy the mascot, the best basketball cheerleaders in the country, indoor fireworks, music, competitions on court and a chance to see hero players—going to a basketball game is fantastic. I last saw Raiders play on 11 February when our friends from Glasgow gave my boys a bit of a beating—the score was 63–86. Glasgow Rocks outplayed us, but it was a fantastic game. The drama and cheerleaders were electric.

Some hon. Members will know that as a massive gay, I am not really into the traditional cheerleader, but I am a big fan of equality, which Plymouth Raiders can boast about. In October 2015, Terrell Lawrence became the British Basketball League’s first male cheerleader and he remains centre-stage as the team’s choreographer and fitness coach. To be honest, I would love to be able to bust a move like he does when Raiders go on. It is on my bucket list, but sadly I fear my busting-a-move days are behind me.

The serious point of this debate is that despite basketball’s growing popularity, its funding is a real concern. As a country, we need to look at how we adopt our funding model. It is great that we put money behind going for gold, but we also need to put money behind sports that attract children and young people, particularly from ethnic minority backgrounds. The lack of certainty about elite-level funding for basketball from UK Sport and Sport England has already been discussed. It needs to be pushed for. If we cannot compete at the highest level and allow our players to do what they do best—give it a go—we lose the role models our young people need to aspire to keep pushing themselves. We need better and more consistent elite and grassroots funding.

Basketball is a sport that centres on team spirit and attracts children and young people, particularly from ethnic minority backgrounds. The lack of funding largely targets the underprivileged areas of the UK, including in Plymouth. The Minister will know that a lack of funding has consequences. She is a real sports fan and is passionate about participation, so she will take these concerns seriously. We need to compete at the world cup, EuroBasket, the Commonwealth games and the Olympics. We also need to be able to compete in new sports such as the 3 on 3, which my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West mentioned.

In a world where we are at risk of turning our back on the global stage, we need to put our best foot forward and compete at international competitions. Basketball teams, like other sports teams, are a source of huge local and regional pride. Sport has a unique power to bring people together. Although basketball was not an English sport originally, it is one that the British people have adopted and hold dear.

This is a debate about not just the sport itself, but what sport can do in our communities. Basketball is a superb example of how elite and grassroots sports teams across the country have a fantastic role to play. Plymouth Raiders have launched two new community clubs for under-16 girls and sessions for walking basketball, which has not been mentioned yet. Similar initiatives are happening across the country and we should give teams the platform to talk up that work. Across the country, whether it is playing, coaching, officiating or volunteering, basketball is a fast-growing sport worthy of support at the highest political level.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Four hon. Members wish to speak, so I will reduce the time limit for each speech to a hard limit of four minutes.

10.13 am

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Given the time limit, I will cut to the chase. This debate comes at a tough and rough time for urban, inner-city communities in our country. Local authorities have had their money slashed by up to 40%. The idea that they could invest in courts and facilities is, I am afraid, pie in the sky. In a constituency such as mine, knife crime and gun crime are soaring. I thank God for groups such as the Haringey Hawks and the Haringey Angels. I thank God for the basketball facilities we have at Ducketts Common and Finsbury Park.

I ask the Minister very seriously why we are looking at the prospect of the decimation of elite basketball in this country. I remind her that this is absolutely an urban sport and a predominantly black, Asian and minority ethnic sport: almost 60% of adults in the sport are from black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds. The figure for adult men is 75%. That is staggering. In reality, they are role models—role models I desperately need—but there cannot be role models if there is no prospect of making it to the elite.

When I look at the figures for this urban sport, which attracts black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in the numbers it does, I have to ask why hockey received £28.1 million and the rugby league received £51.6 million. Why is it that canoeing, equestrian, cycling and rowing all do so much better? Where is the equity in that formula? Can the Minister satisfy herself that there is no unintended or unconscious bias in the way that judgments are being made about that funding? Urban communities across the country require young people to have the prospect of reaching their hoop dreams.
This debate is important because this is a critical moment for basketball in this country. There are many people in the Public Gallery and across the country waiting to hear what the Minister will say. On the tube, people have tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Are you going to be in the debate? What can you do about it, Mr Lammy?”

When we look at the problems that urban communities have across the country, we cannot talk about dreams and cut them away in the same breath. We need proper grassroots basketball, of course, but we absolutely need the prospect of being successful in the elite game. Ultimately, this debate is about whether we are going to throw that away after all the effort that has been put in. I cannot wait to hear the Minister’s response.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) on bringing this debate to Westminster Hall for consideration. I am pleased to participate and to see whether we can persuade the Minister to do what everyone wants her to do: put more focus on basketball in this place and across the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, basketball is a small but passionate community, in which it is fair to say that love of the game has overtaken any issues of identity. With 22 teams in the Basketball Northern Ireland league, it is safe to say that we are happy to play—and hopefully beat-any and all teams.

My interest in basketball comes from my boys. We live on a farm and we had a basketball net out in the yard among the tractors and the cows. The boys played basketball when they could and it was a fun game for them. In America, where we sometimes go on holiday, the love of basketball is a phenomenon like our love of football or rugby. The players are superstars, the cheerleaders are as ferociously competitive as the players, and the sport has a buzz about it. Although we do not currently have that buzz in the UK, that is not to say that we cannot and will not. When I look back at Ulster Rugby in Northern Ireland 20 years ago, they did not have the passion and the buzz around them that they now have. I am astounded at how far they have come. It is not surprising to see young boys and girls walking down the streets with their Ulster tops on, which gives an idea of what dedication and promotion can achieve among young people.

What brought about that change? It was the sport’s and promoters’ dedication to slogging away when we were not winning; it was going to schools and inspiring young people to take up the sport; and it was promoting the schools rugby cup with time, money, passion, drive and determination. All those things have brought about the change that was necessary.

The same can be said about the Northern Ireland football team, who are at a level that was unheard of years ago. We are no longer the joke act. The best teams understand that there is a good chance that they could fall under the weight of the green and white army; many of us have believed that for a long time, and the figures and statistics indicate it as well. For those who have kept paying for season tickets and hoping and believing, the ambition used to be for Northern Ireland to score one goal, but now it is for us to beat the best teams—and we can.

Hon. Members have mentioned cycling. Britain is now the greatest cycling nation in the world. Did that happen by chance, because hundreds more people just decided to take up the sport and were good at it? No, it came through a targeted offensive aimed at young people and showing what could be achieved. Why are we taking the focus off inspiring our young people to get off the sofa, get off their mobiles, interact in a team, build fitness and build relationships? We regularly read figures about childhood obesity. If those figures do not inspire us to act, I do not know what will.

Every year, Wimbledon lights a fire in a child to pick up a tennis racket. My parliamentary aide’s niece and nephew have done just that, and they now play for the Ulster team. We could achieve even more inspiration and attraction, but that takes funding.

For the sake of mental and physical health, combating social isolation, encouraging those who struggle academically and building self-esteem and confidence in children, I ask the Minister and her colleagues for action to help children who play basketball, as well as tennis and other sports. Perhaps we can win gold at the next Olympics—who knows? We can certainly get kids off the sofa and involved in sport if we fund it and make it attractive and accessible. That would be gold enough for me.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to take part in this debate, which was introduced with such energy, enthusiasm and expertise by my constituency neighbour and good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). In the few minutes available, I would like to address the history of basketball, the implications for its future, and the issue of broadcasting.

As several hon. Members have said, the United States have always provided inspiration. My hon. Friend mentioned “White Men Can’t Jump”; I understand that the basketball film that everyone is looking out for this year is “Uncle Drew”. Basketball first came to the United Kingdom in the 1890s, when a gentleman called C. J. Proctor of the Birkenhead YMCA went to Canada, was inspired by the sport and brought it back to our country. The participation of American soldiers in the first world war reinforced that connection. The London YMCA—the greatest team in our country in the 1920s—went to the 1924 Paris Olympics, at which basketball was a demonstration sport, and did not lose a game.

We have that history with the United States, but even today people go on basketball scholarships there and in Europe, because the only way they can become really expert at the game is by going abroad. In my area, the Bradford Dragons have a number of players who have followed that pattern: Zion Tordoff, Eisleey Swaine, Mate Okros and Tamas Okros have all played for England at age-group level and are now looking for opportunities elsewhere. At a lower level, the Keighley Wildcats aim “to promote healthy living, social interaction and community togetherness through our mutual love of the game of basketball”, which is all organised by a man who goes by the great name of Andy Romero-Birkbeck.
The link with the United States brings me on to broadcasting. Every year, National Basketball Association teams play a game at the O2 in London and not enough is made of it, whereas when American football is played at the O2 we get live free-to-air coverage. The NBA is the greatest basketball league in the world, and we need more support from it. Why not have a British final at the same venue on the same day as the NBA game? That would create an event that might be attractive to free-to-air TV.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West is right to say that some of the basketball figures on the BBC Sport website have been disappointing. More needs to be done to promote the sport, perhaps by showing it on a different night; Friday is a very crowded night for sports, so Thursday might be better. We must also make the most of the broadcasting opportunities from the Commonwealth games. These are only the second ever Commonwealth games—Melbourne was the first—to include a basketball tournament. Both England and Scotland will be represented, and it will all be broadcast live on free-to-air TV. I do not think that the sports for the Commonwealth games in Birmingham have been decided yet, so let us lobby to ensure that they are the first Commonwealth games in the United Kingdom to feature basketball. There is an awful lot more to do on broadcasting and general promotion of the game.

I end with an appeal to the Minister. We all have great confidence in her; we know that she loves sport, that she does not take no for an answer and that she knocks heads together. The rules are the rules, but sometimes they have to be interpreted creatively. We have to preserve our national teams, because they are the heroes and heroines who inspire people to take up the game. Whatever else the Minister does in her tenure, please will she save British basketball?

10.25 am

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for securing this important debate. As so often happens, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) has said what I wanted to say better than I can, so I will be brief.

We have already heard how basketball reaches further into communities than many other sports in this country, how it reaches children from black, Asian and minority ethnic and deprived backgrounds, and what value it provides. The case for funding is clear, but we need to stress the value that basketball can bring to our local communities by tackling the problems that we struggle with in London and across the country, including serious youth violence, and young people getting involved in crime and needing to be helped out.

I will not go through all the statistics, but 2017 was one of the worst years for fatalities, knife crime and youth violence since the 70s. 39 teenagers were stabbed to death. There have already been 13 fatalities in London this year, and we are only in February. We know that knife crime is a complex issue with many underlying causes that we could debate for hours, but among them are cuts to our youth services. Young people do not have the roots, activities, aspirations, hopes and role models that they once did. Basketball has a real role to play in addressing that.

Mrs Hodgson: Further to my hon. Friend’s point about youth crime, is she aware of a fantastic initiative in Newham, the Carry A Basketball Not A Blade campaign?

Sarah Jones: Absolutely. I have met many young people who have come out of prison, who have carried knives or who have been involved in knife crime or selling drugs. Many of them have responded well to sports, including through organisations such as Gloves Not Gunz. There are many different sporting activities that we can encourage people to get involved with, but basketball is a key one.

After the Croydon riots in 2011, teachers and basketball players in Croydon set up the Croydon Cougars. The club does fantastic work with local people, and it also manages to fit in some extra homework time, so that children can play basketball for free and get tuition and help with homework afterwards—a good combination. Croydon Council and OnSide Youth Zones are funding a very big and impressive new, all-singing, all-dancing, youth centre in Croydon that will cost £6 million and will open next year. It should bring in thousands of young people and give them things to do, and basketball will be a key part of it.

I want young people in Croydon to be able to say, “If I put the effort in, show talent and become good at this, there is a pathway right to the very top,” but unless we fund the very top as well as the grassroots, that pathway will not be there for them. I echo other hon. Members in urging the Minister to consider basketball really carefully and see whether she can find some money for it.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): We come to the Front-Bench spokespersons. You have 10 minutes each. If you could be a little disciplined and show a bit of flexibility, so that Alex Sobel can sum up at the end, that would be helpful. I call Gavin Newlands.

10.29 am

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Bailey. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair once again. It is also a pleasure to take part in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), not only on securing it, but on getting on the parliamentary record what I think is the first reference to Ice Cube. He will be remembered for that, if for nothing else. I also echo the sentiments expressed so powerfully by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy): I think he spoke for many of us.

Unfortunately, basketball is a slightly touchy subject in my constituency. As we heard, we hosted the Scottish Rocks at the Braehead arena for about six years. In 2008, however, they moved to Kelvin Hall in Glasgow, before moving to their current home at the Emirates arena. Their move to Glasgow coincided with a name change: the team is now called the Glasgow Rocks. We already have Glasgow airport in the Renfrewshire area, so I am sure we could live with the name change if the team chose to come back to Renfrewshire.

Alison Thewliss: No, we are keeping them.

Gavin Newlands: We shall see about that. The Rocks attract healthy crowds. Their popularity should not come as a surprise, given that they are second in the
British Basketball League championship, sitting just behind what is apparently the best team in the league, the Newcastle Eagles, and given that basketball is so popular in local schools and communities. As we have heard, it is also popular in English schools, where over a million children between the ages of 11 and 15 play the sport.

A survey carried out by Sport England in 2012-13 identified basketball as the third most popular sport for once-a-week participation among over-16s, behind only football and rugby union. That level of engagement is mirrored in other age groups, because basketball was the fourth largest team sport in 2016, with over 160,000 people playing recreationally every single week.

I have witnessed the popularity of this sport in my constituency, through the excellent work of React Basketball. It exists to advance public participation in the sport, regardless of how good someone is at it. Essentially, its work is about keeping children active. The great thing about React is that its work is not limited to encouraging boys and girls to play the sport; it also works to instil a sense of social responsibility and pride in young people. It is firmly rooted in the community, and it extends its efforts to raising funds for other causes, such as cancer research. It is a fantastic example of a sporting charity that uses the power of sport not only to help those whom it engages with directly, but to help improve local communities and wider society.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the achievements of Basketball Paisley. It is considered to be one of Scotland’s biggest and most successful basketball clubs, and since its inception its various teams have managed to bring 95 trophies back to Paisley. In fact, only last Friday night, the senior men’s team were crowned Scottish league champions, 18 years after their last league title.

As with React, Basketball Paisley is successful on and off the court: it does community outreach work, and runs community clubs across Renfrewshire and East Renfrewshire for kids from primary school through to second year at secondary school. These clubs are open to everyone regardless of ability, and are always popular among schoolchildren.

Basketball also leads the way when it comes to disability sport: many disabled people play and become involved in it. The Great Britain wheelchair men’s basketball team won gold in the European championships for the third time in a row in 2015 and were fourth at the London Olympics, and the GB women’s team won their second bronze in a row at the European championships in 2015. Wheelchair basketball is an inclusive sport that allows many individuals who would not normally be able to access sporting opportunities to become involved in sport. According to the all-party group on basketball, wheelchair basketball is the largest disability sport in the world, and it has the world’s largest women’s league in disability sport.

British Basketball is working hard to grow basketball, and its “Transforming Basketball in Britain Together” strategy sets out its intentions to improve the sport in all parts of the UK, from grassroots through to elite level. However, as I will discuss a little later, basketball, like other sports, is held back by UK Sport’s fixation with funding only elite sports that have medal potential. The Scottish Government recognise the popularity of basketball and encourage people across Scotland to play it. The Shell Twilight Basketball project, supported by the Scottish Government’s CashBack for Communities fund, which we have already heard about, provides basketball sessions infused with education and life skills for all those aged between 11 and 21.

The Scottish Government are keen to get more women playing different sports, including basketball, and in 2017 they announced a fund to help that aim become a reality. One of the projects that benefited from that fund was the Scottish Women Warriors wheelchair basketball club. It is a fantastic club that is based on the philosophy that it is “about what you can do—not about what you can’t do”. It is a fantastic resource to get people fit and healthy, but perhaps even more importantly, the Scottish Women Warriors club serves as a vital support network for all the women involved. Projects such as this one have helped to grow the sport over the past four years, with research from the Scottish Parliament Information Centre revealing that 82% more women now play in basketball clubs. Groups such as the Scottish Women Warriors not only highlight the inclusivity of wheelchair basketball but help to capture the growth of the sport.

A few months ago, I met Kevin Pringle and David Watt from Basketball Scotland, and they spoke with great passion about the fantastic work that the sport does to encourage individuals from all backgrounds to start playing it. It is important that such work is recognised in the funding of groups.

As I have said, one of the stumbling blocks threatening the growth of basketball is the stringent funding criteria of UK Sport. This issue does not just affect basketball. I have written to UK Sport about the impact that its funding criteria have on other sports, such as badminton. Another stumbling block is the historically low level of direct funding for basketball in relative terms. As we heard from the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), basketball receives only £102 per adult participant. She referred to netball, but hockey receives £259 a head in funding, and my sport of rugby union receives £276 a head. These are the figures for Sport England funding only; if we include elite funding from UK Sport, the discrepancies become far, far greater.

UK Sport’s funding criteria ignore the high participation rates for basketball, and the sport is also doing great work in recruiting individuals from diverse backgrounds. I agree with British Basketball when it says:

“We believe Basketball has a unique case for funding, as it is not just a sport, but also a way to engage disengaged young people, particularly from BAME communities, and offer wider life opportunities, and reduce the potential for involvement in anti-social and criminal activities”.

Unfortunately, despite the great work that basketball does in our communities by improving health outcomes, reducing antisocial behaviour and encouraging involvement from diverse groups, British Basketball warns that it is reaching a “crisis point in funding”, which puts its progress in real danger.

Winning a medal at the Olympics should not be the only way in which we judge success. UK Sport’s funding criteria should also judge participation rates, engagement from diverse backgrounds and social impact. Assessing sports by these factors would help sports such as basketball to grow and flourish.
Much more importantly, right across the four nations we need to become much fitter and healthier. The obesity and inactivity rates are desperately high, and they not only impact on individuals, particularly later in life, but are a great cost to society and the public purse. It is estimated that obesity and physical inactivity cost NHS services across the UK around £6 billion a year, and the cost to the wider economy would be much higher.

The future of basketball can be bright, but the sport needs to be supported to achieve its full potential. Experience shows that young people from all backgrounds are jumping—literally and figuratively—at the chance to play basketball. However, the success of the sport is under threat due to the funding criteria of UK Sport. We need to use this debate to call on UK Sport to recognise participation rates as much as it recognises medal success or medal potential. We all want to see our teams and athletes winning medals, but the best way to ensure that happens is by supporting grassroots sports and providing a pathway through to the elite level.

I will end by congratulating Scotland on qualifying for the Commonwealth games for the first time. I wish the team all the very best on the Gold Coast.

10.38 am

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for calling this debate. He is a champion of basketball, serving as the chair of the all-party group on basketball, and is also a fierce supporter of his local team, Leeds Force.

I also thank all Members from all parties for their contributions today. As has already been pointed out, basketball is a truly unique sport. I played on my university team for three years and enjoyed it, proving that mixed-race, Pakistani-Polish girls can jump. [Laughter]

Basketball has an amazing grassroots following and reaches out to demographics that other sports simply cannot. It gathers popular support among black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, and among those who come from traditionally poorer backgrounds.

In the UK, basketball is the second most popular sport played by 11 to 15-year-olds, and that cannot go unnoticed. One in four teenagers played it last month that basketball speaks to. We have Luol Deng, originally from Sudan, who moved to Brixton, where he played basketball at his local club and went on to become a two-time NBA all-star. Do we have the next Luol Deng, the next LeBron James, the next Michael Jordan, in our ranks? We do not know. But one thing is certain: if we do not fund basketball, we will never know.

Sadly, no Government funding will be available for elite athletes from April. That risks preventing participation in the world cup, EuroBasket, the Commonwealth games and the Olympics. Although success at the Olympics brings wonderful plaudits for those sportsmen and women who work tirelessly for success, our funding formula cannot always be driven by Olympic medal potential. As my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) have said, it is right that as a country we support athletes who are at the top of their game—those who have the ability to achieve their dreams—but when large swathes of young people are galvanised by their love for a sport such as basketball and not by Olympic medal potential, we owe it to them to ensure adequate funding.

It is a terrible shame that our professional basketball teams have been pushed to the brink of financial collapse. A last-minute deal saved our national team from pulling out of the European championships this year. Without additional funding, we risk losing future stars and damaging the positive impact that basketball has on all our communities. The recent U-turn made by Sport England suggests that there is the capacity for bespoke partnerships. Badminton was originally one of five sports set to lose all its funding for the next Olympic and Paralympic games; however, it has now been placed on a medal support plan, following the team’s success at the 2017 world cup championships.

Basketball’s contribution to local communities deserves recognition. Look at who we have here in Westminster Hall, coming and fighting for their sport. Look at the cross-party agreement we have today about the necessity of adequate funding for basketball. Sometimes sports need to be judged more than on just their medal potential. The narrative must change. I hope that the Minister agrees that if we refuse to give basketball the funding it needs, we risk losing an exceptional sport and all the people it reaches out to.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for securing this debate. Given the number of contributions from colleagues across the House, I hope that the players who have travelled to watch the debate from the Gallery, and indeed those who are watching outside, recognise how much we value basketball in this place.

Colleagues have made some brilliant speeches, and at this point I particularly mention those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead.
(Sir Mike Penning), the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead—a genuine champion for sport in his constituency, and a fellow Tottenham fan—made a really important point about getting basketball working better together, and I would welcome his thoughts and comments after the debate on how we can make that happen. Likewise, the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) made some really important points about broadcasting and displayed some creative thinking about how we can bring that together, so I would welcome his thoughts also on how we can promote the game.

**John Grogan:** Does the Minister agree that the BBC coverage has been valuable? Whereas on YouTube people watch for three or four seconds, I understand that on the BBC it is 15 to 20 minutes. Whatever happens in the future, that has been of some value.

**Tracey Crouch:** I completely agree. I will refer to the BBC coverage in my speech. It is important to remember that people watch the BBC’s free-to-air broadcasting and that it brings value to sport in this country.

I pay tribute to the comments made by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, who has been a true champion of basketball for all the time we have been in the House together. It was her passion that had me shooting some hoops in the shadow of Big Ben in the pouring rain—it was hard, however, for me to shake off my netball arm. She mentioned some comparative funding figures. I know she appreciates that funding is complex and is allocated for lots of different factors, and I hope she will not mind if I take her points away, consider them in more detail and get back to her if necessary.

In response to the points made by the right hon. Member for Tottenham and the hon. Member for Croydon Central, I could not agree more about the disruptive and the diversionary power of sport. I sit on all the relevant ministerial groups—something I am sure they appreciate—including that on gangs, in which I regularly try to promote sport and ensure that its power is recognised and funding made available, so that projects can go into communities to help the disruptive and the diversionary aspects that the Members are rightly concerned about in their London constituencies.

As a nation, we should be proud of the investments we make in support of sport, both at the grassroots and on the Olympic and Paralympic stage. After Rio in 2016, many international Sports Ministers came to me to see how they could get a better understanding of how we invest in sport, with our unique mix of Exchequer and lottery funding. We are very different from America, for example, where sport is solely privately funded, and from China, where it is completely state-funded. We have a true mix of funding streams. As colleagues know, Sport England invests lottery and Exchequer funds in its “Towards an Active Nation” strategy. Sport and physical activity have the power to transform people’s wellbeing and create a fitter, healthier and happier nation. UK Sport inspires the nation by investing in Olympic and Paralympic success. The two organisations have an agreed memorandum of understanding on talent, but are largely tasked to invest in sport and physical activity at different levels against criteria specific to their remits.

I am a fan of basketball. I never played, because my sister is about 6 inches taller than me and also three years younger. So I stuck to football and she stuck to basketball and my poor mum’s garden was obliterated as a consequence. However, I recognise the opportunities basketball provides across the country and internationally. At the grassroots, basketball can have great success in engaging young people from disadvantaged communities, which is reflected in Sport England’s investment in the sport at that level. The organisation’s Active Lives figures show that just over 300,000 people in England had played basketball at least twice in the previous 28 days, and between 2013 and 2021 it expects to invest just over £18 million in basketball’s grassroots. That investment runs much wider than in national governing bodies, and includes localised projects such as StreetGames doorstep clubs and providers such as Reach and Teach. Basketball England will receive £2.1 million of Sport England investment to deliver satellite clubs that create regular, informal opportunities for young people who have not made the commitment to regular club basketball or are completely new to the game, particularly young people from groups typically underrepresented in sport. Other organisations such as county sports partnerships also receive funding to invest in satellite club projects locally, including basketball provision. A total of 608 satellite clubs have been established between 2013 and 2018, attracting nearly 45,000 young people.

Basketball is a sport with professional opportunities for those with skill and commitment. The men’s and women’s British basketball leagues represent the top tier of domestic competition. They offer ambitious playing opportunities for some of the most talented individuals and a showcase of regular live games for their fans. As has been mentioned, not only can BBL fans follow the competition in person or streamed online, but they can now enjoy 32 games broadcast on the BBC via the red button, making the domestic league possibly more accessible than ever before. There is always more to be done, but rights are matters for national governing bodies. Earlier this year we welcomed an eighth regular season NBA game to London, and I am keen to encourage more NBA presence and investment in the UK as part of our wider ambitions to bring more US sports over here.

There is much to appreciate about basketball in the UK, but we find ourselves in a difficult financial situation. A great number of conversations have taken place in recent months with British Basketball, Sport England, UK Sport and the hon. Member for Leeds North West and the all-party group about the state of the finances in supporting a financially sustainable GB set-up. It is with great regret that none of that investigation has identified viable solutions. That has led to us discussing the matter here again today.

When I saw British Basketball last year, it was optimistic about a commercial sponsorship that would have helped enormously, but sadly that fell through. British Basketball approached my Department again in January to outline its immediate shortfall, and a great deal of effort on all parts sought a potential solution to support the age group GB teams through Sport England talent funding.
As our English sports council, Sport England invests in participation and physical activity, but its priority must be to support its grassroots programmes, which include using sport to reach into communities that other initiatives do not.

The other sports body in which we invest Exchequer and lottery funds is UK Sport. UK Sport funds Olympic and Paralympic success. Its “No compromise” funding philosophy has taken the GB Olympic team from 36th in the medal table in Atlanta 1996 to third in London and now to second at Rio 2016 in both the Olympic and Paralympic Games. It has done that through investing strategically in the right sports, the right athletes and the right support programmes to meet its goals. UK Sport has made its complex funding decisions for this Olympic and Paralympic cycle, as in previous cycles, based on the likelihood of medal-winning performances in Tokyo in 2020. Against those fundamental criteria, basketball is sadly not yet in a position to receive funding.

However, the hon. Member for Leeds North West raised the issue of 3 on 3 funding, and I am happy to look further into that, particularly since the qualification process will not be confirmed until early next year. That will have a huge impact on the shape of the competition. Indeed, that issue was one of the key asks in his speech. I hope that I have reassured him that I will take that away.

We have established an expert body in UK Sport—it is envied around the world—to take on the funding mandate and make difficult decisions on how to deliver within that. I still believe that it is important that it is not a matter of direct ministerial intervention. These long-term investments are measured and monitored against clear criteria, not my personal interests or empathy.

Mr Lammy: On the point the Minister has just made—I am grateful she will look at 3 on 3—we could be in a situation after the next Olympics where elite and Olympic sport are further away from urban communities, but in other communities, where there is hockey, canoeing and rowing, it is all around.

Tracey Crouch: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. That is why it is important that we continue to invest in the grassroots and community delivery. I completely empathise and sympathise with the points that he and others have made about the talent pathway. That is why we need to continue to have these conversations, particularly around 3 on 3 funding.

As other colleagues have mentioned, basketball is not the only Olympic sport that UK Sport does not fund. While I completely agree about the good opportunities it can deliver in communities—that is why we will continue to do much through grassroots development—many other sports could set out equally credible reasons to receive elite-level support on a variety of different funding criteria. Eleven governing bodies, including British Basketball, did just that most recently under the banner of “Every sport matters.” I have all 11 in mind as we consider the asks made today.

Sir Mike Penning: The Minister is passionate about sport and in particular about basketball, although I know she does not want to be drawn into her personal views and, as a former Minister, I fully understand that.

The difference between basketball and the other sports on the list she just referred to—I have looked at it—is that basketball touches areas of the community that are not touched by those other sports. We are reaching out beyond communities such as Tottenham, where I grew up, into areas such as my constituency, where we did not traditionally have that reach. The participation across communities is not touched by those other sports. Every sport says that it is different, but basketball is clearly different.

Tracey Crouch: I hope that so far in my speech I have assured colleagues that I absolutely recognise that point. It is why we look at different funding criteria for different sports across the whole activity perspective in the sports strategy. We also do that in the work we do in all Departments, whether that is to get people healthy or to get them engaged in their communities and so on. I hear what colleagues are saying, but at the same time funding criteria are set by UK Sport for the Olympics.

It is important to say that no funding criteria have been set beyond Tokyo 2020. UK Sport will begin its Paris 2024 funding cycle in due course. Criteria will be reviewed, offering the opportunity to reflect on the existing strategy of investment for the next cycle. UK Sport will then publish a clear set of investment principles against which future awards will be made. I hope that that reassures Members that this is not a closed book.

Mrs Hodgson: Will the Minister give way?

Tracey Crouch: Sorry, but I cannot, otherwise I will not give the hon. Member for Leeds North West time to respond. For the current cycle, UK Sport has set a clear investment strategy, has made a long-term commitment to invest against that and is delivering against that.

I recognise that elite basketball and top-flight players can have an enormous impact on the grassroots across the country. Many colleagues have made that point. Clubs such as Brixton Topcats and those mentioned this morning can and do reach some of the most diverse young communities in the country and signpost opportunities for the most talented to follow in their footsteps. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead writes to me on how we can promote and expand basketball and what more can be done together, we will reflect on that.

I am committed to continuing to work with all the constituent bodies delivering basketball in this country and to support grassroots opportunities where they are needed. We will always consider providing elite team funding should the funding criteria be met, but this debate is not the final discussion. There is still time before the end of March. We all need to work together to ensure that we find a solution. In the meantime, we will continue to support governing bodies, clubs, satellite club providers and other bespoke local projects to support grassroots basketball across the country.

10.58 am

Alex Sobel: Because I have little time, I will concentrate on the Minister’s remarks. I thank her for taking on board two of my recommendations, but I want to refer to the conversations I had yesterday with UK Sport. It admitted that basketball had medal potential, but that it would take 12 years. UK Sport initially funded basketball...
in 2006, but that ceased in 2014. UK Sport did not see through those 12 years that it identified to me on the phone yesterday. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said, funding is £102 per adult participant, which is the lowest of any team sport, even though it has the second highest participation rates. With those participation rates, it surely has Olympic potential, and UK Sport admitted as much.

A number of Members, including the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and my hon. Friends the Members for Keighley (John Grogan) and for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), mentioned the Commonwealth games. I want to highlight the letter that FIBA sent to the Minister yesterday. I received a copy. It said:

“I revert to the FIBA October letter, sent to British Basketball, that England and Scotland’s Commonwealth Games participation could still be under threat if Great Britain Basketball cannot fulfill its senior fixtures in the next windows.”

Yesterday, UK Sport said to me that GB Basketball should perhaps relook at its strategy and concentrate on the Commonwealth games. FIBA said that is not possible. I am concerned that UK Sport is luxuriating in complacency about UK basketball and does not understand the implications of its actions across the piece. An urgent discussion is needed among the Minister, possibly me, GB Basketball, Sport England, UK Sport and others, and I am glad that the Minister is committed to that. As a matter of urgency, we need to move things on so that we can save UK basketball, which is a unique sport in this country.

**Question put and agreed to.**

That this House has considered the future of basketball in the UK.

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**PACE Trial: People with ME**

**[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]**

11 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the PACE trial and its effect on people with ME.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

“The doctor doesn’t see me crawl on the floor. The doctor doesn’t know I don’t shower every day or brush my teeth twice a day like everyone else. He isn’t aware of my frequent sore throats, my poor balance, my difficulties with reading, my muscle twitches, or my sound intolerance, and he certainly wasn’t here to nurse me when once I was too weak to eat.”

Those are the words of a junior doctor living with ME, who alongside nearly 1,000 others has contacted me prior to this debate.

Myalgic encephalomyelitis, or ME, has been described in many ways, but labels such as chronic fatigue syndrome or post-viral fatigue syndrome simply do not come close to the living hell experienced by many ME sufferers—a hell that is made worse by the lack of understanding that is faced when seeking help.

ME is estimated to affect about 250,000 people in the UK and is classified by the World Health Organisation as a disease of the central nervous system. Symptoms can include debilitating muscle pain, severe headaches that are often made worse by light or noise, significant impairment of short-term memory and post-exertion malaise that can last days and even weeks.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Does she agree that there is still huge concern among ME patients that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence says it will not abandon the promotion of physio-social therapies for ME, despite the widespread scientific criticism of the PACE trial methodology, and that we must ensure that that is addressed as a matter of urgency?

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will come on to the NICE guidelines later in my speech.

Although ME is a pathological, not psychological, condition, much about it remains a mystery. The reasons for that are twofold. First, many sufferers are housebound and therefore easy for society to ignore. Secondly, there is a lack of awareness among medical professionals and as a result a woeful lack of quality research. What we do know is that ME is often triggered by a viral infection such as flu, but, unlike healthy individuals, people living with ME do not recover. Into that research drought entered the PACE trial—pacing, graded activity and cognitive behaviour therapy; a randomised evaluation.

The trial was unique in medical research. It was funded by the Department for Work and Pensions to the tune of £5 million, a point to which I will return. From the very start the PACE trial was flawed. In contravention of the World Health Organisation classification, it assumed that ME was psychological and sufferers could recover if they chose so to do. Thus the PACE trial was framed in psychological terms.
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. Does she agree with me that a lot of employers do not actually understand how people with ME suffer and that that can affect their employment? It can also affect housewives.

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. The public perceive it as mere tiredness, but it is so much more than that. The debilitating pain that ME sufferers experience is something that we all should be aware of.

The participants in the PACE trial received a range of different treatments, including cognitive behaviour therapy and graded exercise therapy, where patients were encouraged to become physically active and then increase the activity’s intensity. Unbelievably for a trial this large, none of the groups was given specific medical interventions. The results were published in The Lancet in 2011, with the contentious claim that CBT and GET brought 30% of patients back to normal, while 60% improved. The media reported that all ME sufferers had to do to recover was exercise. However, the report was immediately questioned by the patient community. How could exercise, the very thing that was known to worsen symptoms, actually help?

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My friend Jo from Leeds wrote to me:

“I’ve had CFS/ME for 25 years. I’d had it for 10 years before it was diagnosed. When I was diagnosed in Sheffield I was told there was literally no service they could refer me to and relied largely on a local support group. I was told by a Leeds GP to ‘just get on with life’ despite trying to hold down a professional job and look after a young child.”

That is a typical story of somebody with ME.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is typical, because the PACE trial had such publicity and was lauded by many as the answer. One participant in the original trial has contacted me:

“I was determined to be a part of the...trial because I wanted to get better—so if this ‘treatment’ could make me better I wanted to give it the chance to do so. I was assigned Graded Exercise Therapy. It never occurred to me that it would actually make me more ill. Nor did it occur to me that decline would not be documented, and that despite patients not recovering (or in some cases worsening), they would publish that the treatment was successful...It was stressed that I would only get better if I tried harder, and even though the graded exercise was clearly making me worse, my struggle and pain was dismissed.”

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): As a former physiotherapist, I recognise that all therapeutic interventions must be patient-led—led by people with the lived experience. Does the hon. Lady agree?

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. In fact, I will be calling for the patient voice to be heard in any treatments.

Calls to publish the raw data—basic protocol in good research—were ignored. Queen Mary University spent £200,000 on keeping the data hidden. Finally, after a long battle, patients won a court order to force the PACE authors to release the data. It was discovered that the authors had altered the way in which they measured improvement and recovery, to increase the apparent benefit of the therapies. Re-analysis showed that the improvement rate fell from 60% to 21% and the recovery rate fell from 22% to just 7%.

The method of patient reporting has also been questioned. As one participant says:

“After repeatedly being asked how severe my symptoms were—in the context of...it’s just me not trying hard enough...I started to feel like I had to put a...positive spin on my...answers. I could not be honest about just how bad it was, as that would...tell the doctors I wasn’t trying and I wasn’t being positive enough. When I was completing questionnaires...I remember second guessing myself and thinking for every answer: ‘Is it really that bad? Am I just not looking at things positively enough?”

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate. The PACE trials have been roundly condemned by many scientists as being totally inappropriate. Does she have a feel for what an appropriate trial might have found?

Carol Monaghan: Yes. I will come on to how an appropriate trial could be done. First, I will mention the self-reporting that was a part of the trial. Questionnaires provided the data and measures of success. There were no physiological or scientific measurements. For patients the damage was done. I am a science teacher by profession and I always told my pupils that there are a number of stages to any scientific investigation: “Start with a hypothesis. Decide how you will test this theory, what measurements you will make, how you will record your results and how you will use these results to draw your conclusions. Those conclusions, which might be different from the original hypothesis, must be based on the evidence you have gathered.”

That did not happen in the PACE trial, which relied on patient self-reporting, rather than measurable physiological parameters. Furthermore, when the results were not as expected, rather than revise the original hypothesis, the investigators simply changed the success criteria. Thus patients participating in GET who had deteriorated during the study were considered recovered.

There are, of course, ways of measuring the physiological impact of exercise. The two-day cardiopulmonary exercise test can objectively measure post-exertional malaise. We know that a person with ME can perform adequately—sometimes even well—on the first day, but can have greatly reduced cardiopulmonary function on the second. The test requires the participant to exercise on a static bicycle, and allows data on oxygen consumption, workload and gas exchange to be measured. Two identical tests, separated by 24 hours, must be carried out to properly measure the impact of exercise. Results from a single test could be interpreted as a lack of fitness. Two tests change that to something quite different. A healthy person will perform better the second time; an ME sufferer will most likely be worse.

Of course, the failure of the PACE trial to do that could simply be put down to bad science, but unfortunately I believe that there is far more to it. One wonders why the DWP would fund such a trial, unless it was seen as a way of removing people from long-term benefits and reducing the welfare bill.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The hon. Lady is speaking very well about the challenges that this illness presents to people, but does she share my concern that in Scotland there is only one specialist, nurse-led ME facility and there are no specialist ME consultants? She raises an important point, but in terms of NHS awareness of the condition, we need to do more to ensure that people are getting the treatment that they undoubtedly need.
Carol Monaghan: This is a worldwide issue. The PACE trial results have affected people all over the world. In my folder, I have examples of people from Australia, the United States and Canada. Although there are no specialist centres in Scotland, the ones in England are recommending graded exercise therapy, which is making people worse. We need to deal with the issue.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: I will make some progress. The PACE trial was used to inform NICE guidelines, which has meant that symptoms have been disregarded, and sufferers are considered to be attention-seeking hypochondriacs or even, in the case of some female patients, hysterical. Although in some ways the lack of belief has been the most difficult thing for sufferers and their families, the impact of the PACE trial and the resulting NICE guidelines is far further reaching. Many sufferers have reported major difficulties in accessing financial support. Employment and support allowance assessments do not consider the impact of exertion on a person’s ability to function on subsequent days, and personal independence payment assessments, which consider ME to be psychological following the PACE report, mean that sufferers struggle to access that entitlement and simply rely on family members.

Conflicts of interest in the trial are also deeply worrying. The former chief medical adviser to the DWP sat on the trial’s steering committee, and ultimately the results of the trial have been used to penalise those with ME. When we consider the relationship between key PACE investigators and major health insurance companies such as Unum, the trial takes on a far more sinister slant. Sufferers have reported that their health insurance company would pay out only if they undertook a programme of GET—an impossible task, as the insurance giants knew.

It is not only adults who are affected. Children with the disease have been subject to care proceedings because of widespread misunderstanding among health workers. ME has been mistaken for school phobia, neglect or even abuse.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: I will in a moment. One mother contacted me, saying:

“Our 12 year old son was seen at specialist ME centre by a consultant who prescribed GET. In one year this ‘programme’ caused our younger’s body to develop higher and higher levels of inflammation, he began limping, was in continual pain from the virus and was in frequent pain. This led to a paediatric Rheumatology Consultant who was shocked it had been left so long and told my son that his toes would be permanently swollen even after treatment as the bones had grown abnormally during the inflammation”.

Layla Moran: I, too, have been contacted by parents in my constituency. In the case of one constituent, her daughter took a year to be diagnosed and missed an entire year of school as a result. The effect on children’s lives at a very young age is palpable.

Carol Monaghan: Many parents who try to home school their children also face local authority intervention, trying to get the children back to school. We must listen to patients.

This disease is very easy to ignore. All too often, those living with ME are housebound, and suffer from what they refer to as “brain fog”, which makes it difficult to mount an organised campaign. That means that much about ME remains unknown. There is some evidence that it could be grouped with auto-immune conditions such as multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis. Some people have reported that certain anti-viral drugs improve their condition, but without properly conducted scientific research, we do not have the answers. Ultimately, the impact of the PACE trial on those with ME has been devastating.

Alison Thewli (Glasgow Central) (SNP) rose—

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con) rose—

Carol Monaghan: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Alison Thewli: My hon. Friend makes a good case. My constituent Carol Ann McGregor has had ME since 1996 and has been bedbound for seven years. She says that she has “lost my life, health, husband, my career and my home”.

Does my hon. Friend agree with my long-term family friend Maureen Bivard that the cover-up, and the way in which the PACE trial was carried out, amounts to a miscarriage of justice for patients?

Carol Monaghan: I think that when the full details of the trial become known, it will be considered one of the biggest medical scandals of the 21st century.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: I am just going to finish off. I am pleased that NICE is reviewing its guidelines on ME and has removed the recommendations to embark on harmful exercise, but I was contacted only last week by a lady who had been told recently by her GP to exercise her way to health. That highlights the huge need for education and for raising awareness among both the public and medical practitioners.

I ask the Minister: can the next set of guidelines be drawn up through listening to those living with ME? What plans does she have to introduce compulsory training for medical practitioners on ME care and treatment? Can she assure me that specialist ME treatment centres are not advertising graded exercise therapy as a method of recovery? Will she support proper funding for ME research? Lastly, will she work with DWP colleagues to ensure that new guidelines are drawn up for dealing with people with ME?

Finally, I thank the Countess of Mar and the ME Association for helping me to prepare for today. I also thank those living with ME, whose voices are not being heard.

11.18 am

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on securing
today’s debate. As she has articulated so beautifully, the situation is clearly very concerning. I know that she has done an enormous amount of work in this area, and has met people, both in her constituency and more widely, affected by the condition, and with expertise on the condition, to hear about its impact on individuals’ lives. As MPs, we all know people in our constituencies who are affected by the condition.

As we have heard, chronic fatigue syndrome, also known as myalgic encephalomyelitis or encephalopathy, is a debilitating and very poorly understood condition, which is estimated to affect more than 200,000 people in England. We do not understand the underlying causes of it, there is no one diagnostic test to identify it, and although patients can improve and recover, there is no cure for it. The condition, which for brevity and to avoid covering you in a thin layer of spittle, Mr Hollobone, I shall refer to in the abbreviated form CFS/ME, can stop a life in its tracks, leaving sufferers unable to carry out the most basic tasks. In the most serious cases, people can be bedbound for weeks at a time. It has a complex range of symptoms, including a very disabling, flu-like fatigue and malaise, and neurological problems. Of course, the impact on friends, families and carers can be significant as well.

It is also true that the difficulties in diagnosis mean that patients with CFS/ME often experience delays in getting the treatment and support that they need. In recognising the need for GPs to be aware of the condition, the Royal College of General Practitioners identified CFS/ME as a key area of technical knowledge that GPs should have as part of their qualifying exams, which answers a question raised by the hon. Lady.

The recommended treatments for CFS/ME, namely cognitive behavioural therapy, or CBT, and graded exercise therapy, or GET, and the evidence for them are the subject of today’s debate. Those treatments were first recommended for patients with mild or moderate CFS/ME in 2007 in the NICE guidance, in line with the best available evidence, which showed that the treatments offered benefits. The guidance sets out that there is no one form of treatment to suit every patient and that the personal needs and preferences of patients should be taken into account. Doctors should explain that no single strategy will be successful for all patients; that in common with all people receiving NHS care, CFS/ME patients have the right to refuse or withdraw from any part of their treatment; and that those with severe symptoms may require access to a wider range of support, managed by a CFS/ME specialist.

The results of the PACE trial, which examined pacing therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, graded exercise and specialist medical care for chronic fatigue syndrome, were published four years after the NICE guidance. The trial ran from 2005 to 2011 and, contrary to what the hon. Lady said, was primarily funded by the Medical Research Council, not the DWP. Total funding was £5 million and the MRC contributed almost £3 million.

The study was undertaken by the Queen Mary University of London. It was the largest ever trial for CFS/ME, including more than 600 participants in England and Scotland. It sought to assess and compare the effectiveness of the four main treatments for CFS/ME—adaptive pacing therapy, CBT, GET and standardised specialist medical care.

The peer-reviewed trial results published in The Lancet in 2011 found, as the hon. Lady said, that 60% of patients with CFS/ME benefited from CBT and GET when provided alongside specialist medical care. CBT and GET were found to be better than pacing therapy, or specialist medical care alone in improving both symptoms and disability, and a follow-up study looking at recovery after one year further supported the benefits of interventions. The trial had ethical approval from the NHS research ethics committee and had ongoing oversight from an independent trial steering committee, which included patient representatives. Trial reports were regularly provided to a data monitoring and ethics committee that had the power to halt the trial if harm was indicated. NICE considered the PACE results in 2011 and concluded that they supported its existing recommendations on both CBT and GET.

The Government are aware that the use of CBT and GET in treating CFS/ME has long been a controversial issue for patient groups, charities and some clinicians. That began with the publication of the NICE guidance 10 years ago and continued with the PACE trial. Since 2011, PACE trial data has been shared with many independent scientists as part of normal research collaboration, including the internationally respected research organisation Cochrane, which independently validated the findings. However, in the last 18 months, the attention on the trial has increased substantially, following a tribunal ruling in August 2016 ordering the release of the trial data to a member of the public, which the hon. Lady referred to. The data has since been examined more widely and critics, including some clinical academics, have suggested that it shows that CBT and GET are not as effective as the trial results suggested.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): This is clearly a very important debate. I think both the hon. Member for Glasgow North West and the Minister would agree that it is not possible to do justice to the concerns raised by all our constituents, and the 200,000 sufferers that the Minister has identified, in half an hour. Does the Minister agree that this is a subject worthy of wider debate in the House of Commons? Constituents such as Sarah Reed, who have written to me, say that because of the belief in CBT and GET, and because academics believe in the results, many other treatments have not been pursued. Does the Minister feel angry about that?

Caroline Dinenage: Thank you for your intervention. As has already been said, it is important that we listen to patients. As I will go on to explain, NICE is now looking at reviewing its guidance on this and, in the light of that, it may well be worth discussing the issue more fully.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that believing patients is also important here? Patients with the condition are often not believed and concerns about the PACE trial have not been believed, and that has just loaded concerns on those individuals.

Caroline Dinenage: As I have already set out, sometimes it can take a really long time for this to be diagnosed. People have to keep going backwards and forwards to GPs and others with their symptoms. Many other potential
conditions have to be discounted before it can be fully diagnosed, which often leaves people feeling that their symptoms are not being taken seriously or they are being dismissed. Obviously, that is massively concerning, which is why, as we have already said, it is important that patients are listened to and that clinical professionals are well-equipped to be able to recognise the symptoms and identify them.

As I said, the data has been examined more widely. Critics, including some clinical academics, have suggested that it shows CBT and GET are not as effective as the trial results suggested. In turn, the trial authors have defended their work. They have responded to criticisms in medical journals and the wider medical printed press. I know the hon. Member for Glasgow North West raised one such criticism at the oral evidence session of the Science and Technology Committee in January, concerning possible conflicts of interest of the PACE trial authors. On that point, in line with normal practice, all such conflicts were published with the trial protocol as well as the results. If she has evidence to the contrary, I would be very happy to discuss that with her afterwards.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the Minister for that. However, they were not disclosed to the PACE participants.

Caroline Dinenage: It is very important that the hon. Lady has raised that point, and I am sure it will be taken into consideration.

Helen Whately: ME sufferers in my constituency welcome that the NICE guidelines are being reviewed, but one problem is that when they find that the existing treatments do not work for them, there is a lack of alternatives. Does the Minister recognise that alternative treatments need to be looked into urgently and offered to patients?

Caroline Dinenage: I am sure that will be part of the NICE guidance. Where there is significant evidence that alternatives deserve greater investigation, I am sure NICE will look at that. I will talk about that a little more in a second.

On conflicts of interest, it is obviously important that researchers and scientists with particular expertise in one area will have worked and shared their expertise in related fields and industries, but transparency regarding conflicts of interests is vital to the integrity of the research. The NHS Health Research Authority already issues guidance on conflicting interests and I understand it will consider whether any further clarity is needed.

Clearly, the controversy around the trial is problematic for researchers, but it is most of all distressing for patients with CFS/ME, who deserve the most appropriate treatment from the NHS and to have confidence in the treatment that is being provided. That is why we welcome the NICE decision to undertake a full review of the guidance, which will examine the concerns around the PACE trial and any implications for its current recommendations. NICE develops its guidance independently to support NHS organisations and clinicians to deliver services in line with the best available evidence. It welcomes the input of stakeholders and more than 10 CFS/ME charities and organisations are already registered to support the guideline development process. All other parties who are interested can comment on the draft scope and draft guidelines at the appropriate time during the development process. Final guidance is expected in October 2020.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Minister makes the point that final guidance is expected in October 2020, but given the significant doubt over CBT and GET and their impact now, does she recognise the strong case for NICE to suspend the current guidance, which points people towards those potentially damaging treatments?

Caroline Dinenage: As an independent organisation, that will of course be a matter for NICE, taking into consideration the evidence.

I know it is a priority for the CFS/ME community that more research into identifying the underlying causes of the condition be undertaken. I would like to reassure those affected that both the MRC and the National Institute for Health Research welcome high-quality applications for research into CFS/ME, including studies to investigate its biological causes, and it will come as welcome news that the MRC is currently funding a project to examine the relationship between abnormal brain structures and symptoms of CFS/ME.

I again thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West for raising this important issue on behalf of those affected by the condition in her own constituency and up and down the country. I hope the debate has been helpful.

Question put and agreed to.
NHS Staff: Oxfordshire

11.30 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered recruitment and retention of NHS staff in Oxfordshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am delighted to have secured this important debate on the retention and recruitment of NHS staff in Oxfordshire. It is a pleasure to see fellow Oxfordshire MPs in the Chamber.

Since my election last summer, the state of the NHS in our county has been one of the issues that my constituents have raised with me most frequently. I pay tribute to all those who work in the NHS in Oxfordshire at every level for their outstanding dedication and commitment to delivering first-class care. We owe it to them, and to patients and their families, to ensure we are providing the best possible service across Oxfordshire and, indeed, the country. I am sure all hon. Members will agree that the staff do an incredible job, but they are under increasing pressure. Some have described the situation as a crisis. Although politicians are prone to hyperbole, I fear that that word is increasingly apt.

Launched last month, our local NHS hit the headlines nationally, as a leaked memo suggested that Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is considering rationing rounds of chemotherapy at the Churchill Hospital for terminally ill cancer patients because of a 40% shortfall in the number of specialist nurses needed to deliver care. I spoke with the trust bosses, as I am sure many other hon. Members did, and they assured me that the leaked suggestion is not their policy—it is important to reaffirm that point—but they confirmed that it is one option among many being considered by senior staff in the privacy of internal conversations. It is alarming that they are having such conversations at all. That points to a wider issue that needs to be addressed urgently.

The problem, of course, goes beyond cancer services at the Churchill. I am sure Oxfordshire colleagues have their own experiences. In my advice surgery, junior doctors, who prefer to remain nameless, have told me in confidence that staff shortages at the John Radcliffe Hospital and high workloads are leaving some departments dependent on less experienced doctors. They tell me that that would not have happened in years past, and that they are now anxious about patient safety. They work far more than their allocated hours to catch up with paperwork, and they are especially concerned about the night shift, when the problem is most prevalent.

In recent years, the NHS in our area has been propped up by the good will of staff at all levels—doctors, nurses and ambulance workers alike—who put patients first, but the stress of the job is affecting them and their families. I am afraid that some are voting with their feet. In nursing, the shortage is most acute. In Oxford, we had 560 unfilled vacancies at the end of last June. The vacancy rate increased from 6% to 10% at OUH trust between October 2016 and October 2017.

Mental health is another area of concern. The child and adolescent mental health services in Abingdon provide outstanding care and support to young people with mental health issues and their families, but I have been contacted by residents who are worried that experienced staff are leaving the profession and the NHS altogether due to the pressure on the service and their workloads. According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, in the Thames valley area, we have a below average number of consultant psychiatrists per 100,000 people, below average numbers of junior doctor psychiatrists, and below average numbers of psychiatric nurses.

The Department of Health’s pledge to expand the mental health workforce to the tune of 570 extra consultant psychiatrists by 2021 is welcome, but the number of medical students specialising in psychiatry has flattened. The Government must do more to ensure Oxfordshire has sufficient mental health specialists to make parity of esteem between mental and physical health a reality. I am interested to hear from the Minister what they are doing about that.

On the mental health of NHS workers themselves, there is a huge if perhaps unsurprising problem relating to stress and sick leave. A freedom of information request by the Liberal Democrats found that nurses took 5,869 days off for stress and mental health-related illnesses in Oxfordshire in 2016-17—up 11% on the previous year.

Why are we having all these issues? There are several strands to the problem, some of which are specific to Oxfordshire and some of which are represented more widely in the country. I will take each in turn. My Oxfordshire colleagues on the Conservative Benches, in particular, would be disappointed if I did not take the opportunity to speak about Brexit, so let me do that first. To put it bluntly, the Government need to do more to reassure the EU citizens working in the NHS that they are not just welcome in the UK but valued. They face uncertainty about their future status, whether they will be settled and the cost and bureaucracy of it all, and they do not have faith in the Home Office to manage the gargantuan administrative burden. More than 2,700 EU nurses left the NHS in 2016—a 68% increase since two years ago. Separate figures from the Royal College of Nursing show that the number of EU nationals registering as nurses in England has dropped by 92%. I am told by local EU nurses that one of the main sticking points is uncertainty about whether their time spent in the UK will count towards career progression in their country when they go back home, so people are making the decision not to come to the UK lest they risk being at a disadvantage in their career. Is the Minister aware of that problem? If so, what is the Department doing to tackle it? I would also like to see the introduction of an NHS passport, or an equivalent with a different name, to secure the rights of EU citizens who have made their home here and to encourage others to come now, because we cannot wait to address this crisis.

Coming back to our home-grown population, the Royal College of Nursing suggests that the next generation of British nurses is deterred by pressure, a lack of funding and poor pay. It also says that the cuts to training places are exacerbating the problem. Just a fortnight ago, we learned of a 13% reduction in the number of UCAS applications for nursing, compared with the year before. This is the second year in a row that applications for nursing courses have fallen, and 700 fewer nurses are even starting. NHS Digital figures show that one in 10 nurses is leaving the NHS every year, and that those leaving now outnumber those joining.
I recently visited Abingdon Community Hospital, and the staff there told me that the shortages mean that they are increasingly using agency staff to fill the gap. Although those staff are well trained, there is strain associated with bringing them up to speed while managing everything else. It is not a sustainable situation.

The RCN is clear that the Government’s attempts to increase the number of trainee nurses are not working, and that care failings are becoming more likely. The Government must address this situation urgently so the public can have confidence in safe staffing levels in our NHS. The Department has pledged an extra 5,000 places for student nurses in 2017. Again, that is welcome, but how does it square with the collapse in applications? I would like to hear what the Minister and the Department are doing about that.

I think we can lift the 1% pay cap for NHS staff, who deserve a decent, fair and long overdue pay rise. The Minister must be aware of what the cap is doing to morale across the NHS—especially in areas such as Oxfordshire, where the cost of living is high.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. She may be about to address this point—I apologise if I am foreshadowing her speech—but she mentioned the cost of living, and of course the cost of housing is a big issue for all of us in Oxfordshire, no matter where we live. Does she agree that one of the most helpful things we can do is to follow the example of schemes such as the partnership in my constituency between Blenheim Estates and West Oxfordshire District Council, which is looking at providing substantially reduced market-rent housing for all key workers—not just those in the health sector? There is a great deal to be done there. Furthermore, institutions such as hospitals may be able to look at similar practices. The clinical commissioning group might take up the long-standing invitation for it to attend growth board meetings, in which it will be able to have some input into the housing provided for key workers, what it costs and where it is located. I am sorry that there are so many points there, but perhaps the hon. Lady can consider them.

Layla Moran: Not at all; I thank the hon. Gentleman. For his helpful intervention. He is right to foreshadow what is coming later. The more times we make the point, the better, because it is the crux of the issue in Oxfordshire. On the pay cap, when will we see the timetable for the pay review? We need to ensure that the basic cost of living at least is covered. I will come on to housing later.

I am glad about the renewed focus on social care in the Department since the reshuffle, but I sincerely hope that it extends beyond just a name change. Staffing levels for the sector are even worse than in nursing in Oxfordshire. One of the more surprising facts I have learned in recent months has been about how many social care staff are leaving the service locally to fill positions in the retail sector created by the opening of the shiny new Westgate centre in Oxford. Pay is at a similar level, but the work is less stressful, so the people doing those vital social care jobs are deciding that they would rather do something else and take the easier path.

It is not just pay that we are talking about; Oxfordshire pays well for such jobs in comparison with other parts of the country. Our area still struggles to recruit and keep people. The recently published Care Quality Commission report for Oxfordshire found that “The system in Oxfordshire was particularly challenged by the issues of workforce retention and recruitment across all professions and staff grades”, and that “countless” concerns had been expressed about recruitment and retention, and their impact on developing a skilled and sustainable workforce.

The report goes on to highlight the need to do more to increase professional development. We must ensure that budgets are available for continuous professional development within the NHS, allowing existing staff to train, develop and build their career over time. Without such opportunities, it is little wonder that they move on. That has been voiced vociferously by nursing leads as another key factor in the retention crisis. I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about CPD and whether the budget for that will be increased.

Then there is overall funding. At the election, all political parties pledged more, but it was not enough. Rather than just talking about how much, I want to talk about how we can be honest with the public about how to pay for more funding, if we are all agreed that that is needed. In the short term, my party would like to see a ring-fenced penny in the pound on income tax, providing a £6 billion cash injection. In the longer term, and as a replacement for national insurance, on the basis of wide consultation, we advocate a dedicated health and social care tax. The advantage of that would be that people could see in their pay packets exactly what we were paying for.

We also want an NHS and care convention to bring together all political parties and stakeholders, so we stop using the NHS and social care as the political football it was during the election. Recently a letter on this issue backed by nearly 100 MPs was sent to the Prime Minister, but I was saddened to see that it was not taken up. I therefore urge the Minister not only to continue to ask the Prime Minister and the Treasury for more money for the NHS but, critically, to buck something along the lines of a cross-party NHS and care convention, so that we can take the NHS out of the hands of political punters and put it back into the hands of patients, where it belongs.

I have talked about what I would like to see from the Government: an open and generous offer to EU citizens; a decent pay rise; better funding, which is not kicked about as much; improved working conditions; and action on bursaries and training for nurses. But, to come to the point made so eloquently earlier, that will not cut the mustard for Oxfordshire, because our biggest issue by far is the prohibitive cost of housing in the county.

I will share an email I received from one of my constituents in Kidlington who works for the NHS. She contacted me to say that she feels as though she will never be able to afford a house of her own: “I work for the NHS and although it comes with fantastic benefits and, I hope, great security it doesn’t pay like those who would be doing the same job as me as an office manager, in the private sector.

My situation is that I have been working for NHS nearly 9 years now. I want to move out and I live in Kidlington. To have a slight chance I would have to do shared ownership. Although not
ideal it is a great stepping stone, and you have to start somewhere. However, if I was to look outside Kidlington, the Bicester area where there is up and coming new builds, the prices are still out of my range. It is disheartening to be rejected, especially when you are literally outside the affordability, yet you have worked, paid taxes and generally contributed to society.

That is a damning indictment, and the despair is shared by so many public sector workers across Oxfordshire. A 2017 study by Lloyds bank listed Oxford as the most expensive city in which to live in the UK, with the average house price now 11 times average earnings. The recent CQC report on Oxfordshire found that staff at every level cited cost of living and housing as barriers to staff recruitment and retention.

There have been some steps in the right direction. As the Minister will know, in March 2016 the OUH trust launched a scheme in which new nursing recruits were offered a cash incentive equivalent to their first month’s rent and a deposit. I have no doubt that the council, the NHS and other organisations in other parts of the county, as we have heard, are doing everything they can—I am not here to bash them—but the fact is that the new houses to be built will not fix the problem. At best, the models show that house prices may flatline over time, but the definition of affordable as 80% of the value of incredibly expensive houses is still nowhere near enough to tackle the problem for public sector workers.

I can propose a solution. I would like to see some kind of Oxfordshire housing allowance for public sector workers given to local NHS staff to help them meet the extremely high cost of living and to tackle our recruitment crisis. Unison's Oxfordshire health branch has called for the reintroduction of an Oxford weighting to help staff with living costs in the area, in line with the NHS weighting already paid to staff in London. I prefer not to do that, simply because “more pay” can be seen as “more valued”, which is not what that is meant to be. I would prefer to see the introduction of a specific payment for housing—a specific payment for a specific problem.

I am open to exploring all options, and I am very keen to hear what fellow Oxfordshire MPs and others think. Without an Oxfordshire housing allowance—a specific payment for a specific problem—these offers remain completely unexplored by the local hospital trust, which has refused repeatedly to engage with me on this issue.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 1 o’clock. I will call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 12.30 pm, so other Members have 10 or so minutes each. I call Victoria Prentis.

11.48 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, and it is a pleasure to take part in the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for securing it.

It is great to see all my fellow Oxfordshire colleagues present today. If I may say so, they have all been great allies in my fight to save acute services at the Horton General Hospital. Talking about recruitment in some detail is particularly useful, because that is our greatest local challenge with regard to good healthcare.

It is also good to see the Minister in his place. Since he took up his role, he and I have spoken many times about the issues faced at the Horton. We in Banbury are waiting patiently to hear the outcome of the Independent Reconfiguration Panel's initial assessment of the permanent downgrade of our maternity services. Our hopes are pinned on a full review, and we were due to find out 10 days ago whether that would take place. We have heard nothing yet, but I am watching the post with interest.

The Independent Reconfiguration Panel is familiar with our situation, having looked at similar proposals to downgrade maternity at the Horton back in 2008. Just as recruitment was the contributing factor almost 10 years ago, the failure to fill middle-grade vacancies at the Horton's obstetric unit was the straw that broke the camel's back in 2016. However, failures in recruitment are not, as we have heard, unique to maternity services at the Horton. We have spoken briefly about chemotherapy services at the Churchill, and at a meeting in January with local GPs, many expressed concerns about the sustainability of their practices in the current recruitment climate. Last week, the Care Quality Commission observed the following in its full and, if I may say so, quite critical review of the local system, which the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon has quoted and which I will carry on a little:

“The system in Oxfordshire was particularly challenged by the issues of workforce retention and recruitment across all professions and staff grades, especially acute hospital staff...and in the domiciliary...market. This resulted in staff shortages, heavy workloads and impacted upon seamless care delivery and integration of services.”

I am reassured that the Department takes recruitment seriously and has invested significant time and resources in addressing current workforce challenges across the nation. Attracting more people to the profession and training them takes many years. The cost of living in our area is high and London weighting is a significant pull factor out of our area, particularly given our very reliable transport links to the capital. We may be a wealthy county but we must think creatively to overcome the current challenges. The future of our services depends on that.

When I called for help, I was overwhelmed by the generosity of local schools and businesses in my area, which offered discounted school fees, free shirts from Charles Tyrwhitt, and free beer from Hook Norton—that made the headlines—to any prospective obstetricians who wanted to apply for a job at the Horton General. As a leading house building authority, Cherwell District Council has been exemplary in its support for the Horton, exploring the possibility of golden handshakes and providing key worker housing. A local developer came forward to offer one of its new build properties to any obstetrician looking to relocate to our area. Yet all of these offers remain completely unexplored by the local hospital trust, which has refused repeatedly to engage with me on this issue.

Last September, the Secretary of State announced plans to offer salary supplements to GPs in rural and coastal regions, which was a really welcome development.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, and it is a pleasure to take part in the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for securing it.
Market towns such as Banbury, Bicester, Abingdon and the many others represented in this Chamber desperately need similar incentives to attract newly trained professionals, whether through an Oxfordshire weighting or a ring-fenced housing allowance. I have no particular view about which would be the more effective incentive—I am happy to explore both. More money is always welcome, but it does not have to be the only answer. Just yesterday, I heard from a Banbury GP who has not been able to recruit a fully qualified international GP who is a resident outside the EU, because of problems with the tier 2 visa requirements. The person is an Australian who trained in Banbury and is very familiar with the local system, and we would really value having her back.

It is important that we consider specialties such as general practice and obstetrics when looking at the shortage occupation list that needs to be filled, because there are gaps in those areas too. We must think outside the box and talk across Departments to find the solutions that we desperately need. We must also have some clarity. When obstetric services at the Horton were suspended in August 2016, we were told that the rotas needed six obstetricians to operate safely. But the goalposts were moved; the trust now tells us that nine are needed before the unit can reopen. Those decisions have real consequences. We must know the potential domino effect that shortages can have on other medical rotas. Since maternity services at the Horton were downgraded, the hospital has, in turn, lost one of its anaesthetic rotas. Difficulties attracting professionals to CT1 and CT2 posts pose a very real risk to the future sustainability of the one remaining rota. Until that can be fully resolved, the threat to all acute services at the Horton cannot be fully ruled out.

Finally, we must learn, as I say repeatedly, to communicate openly and transparently. Extracting recruitment information from the trust is painfully slow. Rather than offer updates, it leaves us to ask for meetings. We are still waiting for the meeting that my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) requested for us to discuss recruitment at the Churchill. Yet when I made remarks on local radio about a perceived culture of secrecy, the trust chairman was very quick to summon me to meet her. I was told by the trust that all Oxfordshire MPs would be sent a detailed briefing on recruitment and retention challenges by 1 February. I have not had such a briefing and I do not know whether other hon. Members have.

Time and again I have offered assistance with tackling recruitment. Schools and businesses made generous offers to attract obstetricians, and I am furious that the trust continues to fail to engage. I am hopeful that the CQC report provides a long overdue reality check and that we start to see a real step change in its approach. I have made clear numerous times that we MPs are ready and waiting to help. I am really hopeful that under the new excellent interim head of the clinical commissioning group, we will start to develop a vision for our future healthcare, which we have so desperately lacked for so long.

This year we mark 70 years of the NHS. I am particularly grateful to the dedicated Horton midwives who now face an almost three-hour round commute to and from the John Radcliffe, following the downgrade of our unit. Experience has taught us that we need to keep up the pressure.

11.56 am

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, and to be among my fellow Oxfordshire MPs. I wish that we could always take the same friendly approach as this county group to different policy issues. It is a pleasure to participate in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), to whom I am very grateful for calling it.

In common with my colleagues, I receive a huge amount of case work from patients, members of the public and NHS staff who are concerned about the local NHS. I want to share one very recent example that offers some very telling lessons. A local nurse who came to one of my surgeries had talked to other nurses in her department and put a notice on the staffroom noticeboard asking for people to add their comments about issues that they wanted raised with their local MP. Low pay and understaffing came right at the top of that list. She was absolutely dedicated to helping her patients, but she felt under extreme pressure. She said to me that the recent negligence claim that was brought against a doctor, which many of us will have seen, could have happened anywhere in the NHS, and that she was enormously concerned. I was very impressed by her dedication and concern to make sure that these issues were dealt with at political level. She did not believe that they were being dealt with and I do not believe that they have been either.

The Library briefing rightly indicates that recruitment and retention are largely the responsibility of individual trusts, yet they are undertaken within a framework of national policy. This is a particular problem for the local NHS—colleagues have already mentioned that. The pay cap in particular is a big issue in Oxford—we have no uplift compared with London, which is a competitor in staffing terms. The large number of EU staff in the local NHS. I will briefly run through each of those three matters before turning to some of the positive moves that are ameliorating the situation but are being countered by those strong headwinds from national-level factors.

The seven-year pay cap has been a particular problem for NHS staff in Oxford because of the gap between wages and our high living costs. It is the No. 1 issue whenever I talk to NHS staff. Yes, there will be local concerns too, but so many staff say to me that they feel they are being forced either to leave the profession or to work as an agency or bank member of staff, because the pay is not keeping pace with the costs that they face. That is a much more expensive way of staffing the healthcare system, because it is much more expensive to fill those gaps through bank or agency staff than by using the permanent workforce. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon mentioned that the Government have maintained that they will lift the pay cap, but that is contingent upon an “Agenda for Change” process. A lot of the NHS staff I have talked to have said they are worried that that could be used as an excuse to screw down terms and conditions.
More than one nurse has said to me on the doorstep that they are concerned about the impact of the removal of the nurse training bursary and pointed out that nurses who are in training cannot do other jobs to keep themselves afloat. They are expected, in effect, to live on thin air. That might be possible at times in some low-cost areas, but it is just not possible in Oxford, and it leads to a lot of potential recruits abandoning their dream of entering nursing. That really is a dream for a lot of people, and they are very motivated to do it, but it is becoming very hard to achieve.

Colleagues have already referred to Oxfordshire’s particular problems with mental healthcare. Mental healthcare funding generally is low in Oxfordshire compared with other clinical commissioning group areas, but that is compounded by the issues with recruitment. Again, there have been positive developments, such as the reinvigoration of the child and adolescent mental health service, but we still have many issues with recruitment.

That is of course compounded by the lack of Oxford weighting, which is a particular problem for us because we are so close to London. If we were not, we might be in a different situation, but there is a natural process whereby staff look to London and see what they would be able to afford there, where their housing costs would be the same, if not lower. Colleagues will know that local NHS staff began a petition calling for some kind of Oxford weighting to be introduced. That petition now has more than 7,000 signatures.

Such a weighting must not be used as an excuse to move away from collective bargaining. I am a bit disappointed that some Government Members have said to me, “Yes, this is why we need to abandon collective bargaining.” That is not what NHS staff have told me they want. A weighting introduced specifically to cover housing costs—we could call it a levy, a special payment or whatever—could be part of a system that recognised the abnormally high costs in Oxford, which is the most expensive place in the UK to buy a home and one of the most expensive in which to rent.

We need to ensure that outsourced staff are covered by any uplift. I was appalled to hear that some outsourced staff have been living in a corridor in a shared house because they cannot afford a room. This is not about people being able to afford their own flat or house; it is much worse. I recently came across a couple living with their children in Blackbird Leys, which is a relatively low-cost area of Oxford, who both work in the NHS. They were unable to afford their rent and thought they would have to move out of the city. That is not uncommon.

I do not want to stress the point too much, but I do not think the answer is to stop Oxford’s economy growing. Instead, we must ensure that we pay NHS staff properly. My party set out in our grey book how we would do that by removing the pay cap, which, given the issues with recruitment and retention, may end up saving the NHS money and result in it losing staff—all those chickens seem to be coming home to roost. I have experienced the same kinds of issues as the hon. Member for Banbury, who mentioned NHS trusts’ problems with recruiting staff from outside the EU, and particularly with getting them on to their books. It will be an enormous problem if we end up taking the same approach to staff from the EU, because the system is already very costly, bureaucratic and unclear.

Given those circumstances and all the problems, local measures can have only limited impact, but I will mention a few of them, because they demonstrate that solving the current problems with recruitment and retention requires national commitment. First, Members have already mentioned that one of the major problems for our local NHS is social care, which is under enormous pressure in Oxfordshire. Social care is the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council, which has struggled to deliver adequate services since its budget was cut by about one third due to reductions in central Government grant. However, there are positive developments in Oxfordshire. The home assessment reablement team—HART—has brought together social care and NHS staff and delivered a big acceleration in the provision of the social care that people need when they are able to go home. That ultimately has not been enough, but it has helped.

Secondly, it has been good to see Oxford Brookes University develop its own nursing and midwifery school in an innovative attempt to bring together research, education and training, which does not happen anywhere else in the country, and to persuade local people that nursing and midwifery may be for them. Again, though, that is a big challenge, because people still have to be able to afford to live in Oxford while they undertake that world-class training.

Thirdly, we have spoken quite a bit about housing. Oxford’s housing plans include a commitment from the city council to enable the NHS to meet employee needs by exempting staff housing schemes on land owned by the NHS from social rent requirements. However, it is important that we ensure that any housing that results from that exemption is permanently provided on a favourable basis, for affordable rent, to those who need it. If it is only later going to be sold and returned to the free market, it is not going to deal with the problems. Applying a 50% affordable housing requirement to new developments in Oxford will also help the situation. Constituents I speak to, including people who work in the NHS, say that schemes such as Help to Buy and the stamp duty holiday are not having an impact, because even contemplating buying a house is far too much of a jump. Genuinely affordable housing would help.

The removal of restrictions on land acquisition, new rules on viability and enabling local authorities to borrow to build would help improve the situation further, especially when it comes to the provision of key worker housing. In Oxford, that has to involve co-operation with neighbouring councils. I am pleased that we have had such co-operation on the Oxford to Cambridge corridor, but that needs to come to fruition. Independent assessments indicate that Oxford needs about 30,000 new homes, but there would be space for only about 8,000 within Oxford’s boundaries even if occupancy levels in the city were intensified. The Oxford to Cambridge corridor
plan has to focus on delivering housing for key workers and people on low incomes; otherwise it will not deliver the change that we need.

The leader of the city council and I wrote to the Housing Minister last week to detail some of the areas where we desperately need change. Oxford probably has the biggest housing crisis of just about any city. Unfortunately, we see that right in front of us every day from the number of people on the streets, but there is also a hidden problem of people struggling in overcrowded or unsuitable accommodation.

The local NHS trust is working hard on recruitment and retention, and it has done some innovative things. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon mentioned the golden handshake people get when they start, which is obviously necessary. A lot of work has been done on advertising, recruitment fairs and so on, and there is an attractive on-the-job training offer, although we always need more funding for that. However, all that has been done in the context of the almost perfect storm of factors that affect us in Oxford—particularly the pay cap and uncertainty for EU staff.

There is an enormous amount that we, as Members who represent Oxfordshire constituencies, should be proud of, and I am sure that we all are. We have world-class services and incredible opportunities because of the proximity of Oxford University, Oxford Brookes University and other research centres, and the incredible diversity of innovative companies and others in our area. However, those world-class services are under pressure like never before. If we want to continue providing the kind of excellent care that I am grateful to have received when I gave birth to both my children in the John Radcliffe Hospital, we need to deal with these issues very quickly.

12.9 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing this debate, and I echo her praise for NHS staff who do a fantastic job—indeed, only the other day I was approached in the street by a constituent who told me just how fantastic his NHS treatment had been.

The issue under discussion is not a new problem or something that started only in the past year. I have chaired a group of Oxfordshire MPs and the clinical commissioning group for a number of years, and this issue has been there from the beginning. If I can segment the NHS market a bit, perhaps we can consider how different elements of the NHS can play their part. First, however, let me say that the release of information to The Times by Churchill Hospital must be opposed. It created much stress among patients, and it bore no resemblance to the policies of that hospital. We should send a firm message to Churchill Hospital that the way it behaved was unacceptable.

Perhaps my constituency is very fortunate, but on several occasions I have been told by constituents that a surgery is full and can take no more people, and that is all down to new housing. Each time I rang the GP surgery, however, I was assured that that is not the case and it still had a tremendous amount of room to take more people. Nevertheless, that does not reflect the current problem with the GP practice system which, however we look at it, we must admit is in need of considerable reform. There are at least two reasons for that. First, we have the problem of young doctors who are unable or unwilling to take on the stress burden created by taking out the loans necessary to buy into the surgery. Secondly, there is a limitation on the ability of GP practices to do some of the minor operations that they have done in the past, and which allowed them to carry on the excellent work that they do for their communities. I urge the Minister to look at that, and perhaps to remove some of the restrictions that apply to the ability to operate in GP surgeries.

Of course GPs need to adapt to new ways of working, and they need to use the internet in a much better way. My own results from what is, I hasten to say, a minor health issue are dealt with by the internet. I email the information in on a regular basis, and the results come back on the internet—fortunately they come back clear each time. [Interruption.]

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): We are all speculating now.

John Howell: I know, and I will leave that issue there.

Social care has been mentioned in terms of its competition with the retail sector in Oxford, which I think is a very real threat. Another issue goes back to one of the more substantial points in the Care Quality Commission report, which is that the joining up and interlinking of different aspects of social care in Oxfordshire leaves a lot to be desired. For example, the amount that was paid by the NHS health trust was different to the sum paid by the county council for the same number of people doing the same amount of work. Evening up that difference must be something to concentrate on, and I wish people success in doing that.

The income of the clinical commissioning group amounts to about £880 million. Staff costs are about 70% of that, at just over £600 million. A 1% pay increase means at least £6 million to £7 million as an unfunded pressure on the health care system, and that is not a very productive way forward. There is no getting away from the fact that the biggest problem with recruitment and retention is living costs in Oxfordshire. There are a number of ways that we can tackle that problem, such as by building more houses—the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge express way is a good joined-up process for dealing with that, and I hope it comes to fruition.

The second thing we can do, I am afraid to say, is change the housing policies in Oxford city. That goes back to conversations that I had ad nauseam with the predecessor of the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). We were known for our fighting over the green belt, and I am glad to infer from what the hon. Lady has said that Oxford is changing the way it deals with issues of planning and housing.

We are talking about a marginal increase across the board, and the uplift that that will bring will not have a big impact on retention and recruitment. It would be much better for us to focus any increases in funds on the issue itself. I ask the Minister, formally, to agree to a weighting for Oxfordshire that gives it some of the strength that London has. As we have already heard,
h housing costs in Oxfordshire are at least as great as those in London, and that must be tackled. We need a specific weighting, not a marginal increase in pay, and since there will be only a limited pot of resources for increasing pay, it makes a lot of sense to concentrate the impact of that in those places with more intractable problems, such as the housing market and living costs in the city.

12.18 pm  

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I thank you for saving the best till last. I congratulate my Oxfordshire colleague, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), on securing this important debate and on her extremely eloquent speech. I echo the way that she opened the debate by paying tribute to our colleagues who work in the NHS. When talking about the problems faced by our NHS locally, we should not lose sight of the fact that we are supremely well served by some extraordinary men and women in our hospitals and GP surgeries, who go well beyond what is required of them to provide first-class care. As Oxfordshire MPs we are also lucky to represent a population that, on the whole, is pretty healthy—indeed, the greatest health care challenge we face is the fact that a lot of our constituents, thankfully, live to a serious old age.

I also want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and my two hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for their fantastic speeches. It may be frustrating for the Front Bench that, although potentially there were plenty of goals to be scored, the debate was conducted as all Oxfordshire debates have been since I became a Member in 2005, in the spirit of doing the best for the county.

I want to mention particularly the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury on the Horton General Hospital, which relates to the problem I want to focus on. She has worked tirelessly to maintain services there, and has made it clear to me that although the Horton is geographically well away from my constituency, the pressure on the local NHS are spread further, enabling a better service to be provided for all. My hon. Friend has come up time and again, as she pointed out, against a culture of secrecy. There have even been court proceedings in which she has been involved. The mind boggles at how the local NHS goes about its business.

Perhaps when the Front Benchers speak we shall go back to playing the traditional national blame game. However, I want to play a bit of a blame game myself—but placing the blame squarely on local NHS management. I do not want to put words into my colleagues’ mouths, but whenever I go to meetings with local NHS management—I ably convened by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley—I find that they are passive, unimaginative and deeply bureaucratic. I find the local NHS system completely opaque, and mired in jargon, endless consultation—or non-consultation—and a woeful lack of action.

The CQC report well illustrates the inability of silos to come together for conversations for the greater good of healthcare in Oxfordshire. An example of that is provided by the biggest local issue for me and my constituency: the closure, coming up for two years ago, of Wantage Community Hospital. It closed in April 2016, apparently for justifiable reasons. It is a very old building and its pipes are ageing. There were continual outbreaks of Legionnaire’s disease, so it was closed for safety reasons; but one would have expected some rapid developments to solve that problem. We were promised a consultation that was going to happen in October 2016; that never happened. Then we got a consultation in January 2017, but because of the opaque bureaucracy that my local NHS enjoys that was a phase I consultation. Apparently the community hospital was going to be in phase 2, which of course—like the gold at the end of the rainbow—has not materialised.

I took it upon myself at the end of last year to convene a meeting—ultra vires, you might say—of local stakeholders, my local GPs and health managers. It was the first time they had all met together, convened by me, the local MP, not by the health authority. Again, there was complete passivity. I shall not bore my colleagues with the complexities of the attempts to untie the Gordian knot, but clearly one of the solutions for local healthcare in Wantage is the expansion of the local GP surgery. It is owned by a private landlord, Assura, but it seems to me a betty landlord that wants to do the best thing; it would be helpful to expand the building. Of course it would receive increased rent as a result. We need, potentially, some financing from the Department of Health and Social Care, but at the utmost we need some engagement from health management. I am the one who has effectively brought Assura to the table to discuss how we can develop the GP surgery, to put some proposals on the table and to search for a funding solution. That could involve all sorts of imaginative solutions. I think there will be a meeting at the end of the month to take things forward, but I find it deeply frustrating that I am the one having to drive the process, and not my local NHS management—not that I am complaining, as it is the only way we shall get results.

[Mr Nigel Evans in the Chair]

As to the quasi-national issues that have been raised, I echo much of what has been said. As a convinced remainer—although, sadly, the horse has bolted—may I get well behind the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon and point out that we have, proportionately, twice as many EU citizens working in our local NHS as elsewhere? As the hon. Lady said, it is absolutely reasonable to say that the Government must do more to reassure our European colleagues who live and work here, who contribute their taxes and want nothing more than to be good citizens of our communities, that they are welcome here and that we have nothing against them. I am sure that now that we have Mr Nigel Evans in the Chair that sentiment will be echoed by him at the earliest opportunity.

Housing is clearly an issue, and although I am sure that all our postbags are full of letters from people who do not want an increase in the amount of housing, we need to speak up for all the people for whom it is essential. They include the very people charged with keeping us healthy. I had not appreciated the issue of visas—that is why the debate is so important. I am driven mad by the lack of imagination on the part of the people running our local health service. That came up in what my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury said about the imaginative solutions that her community
came up with to secure a senior obstetrician. Shift patterns are an example of what I mean. Nurses leaving the John Radcliffe after 9 o’clock in the evening is something that needs to be looked at.

Parking at the JR is appalling. Surely it is possible for representatives of the local council and the JR to sit down and find a parking solution. An imaginative health authority and imaginative health leaders would look holistically, if I may put it in that way, at the entire working environment for nurses and doctors, particularly in hospitals: how do they get there, how much does that cost, how can parking arrangements be improved and how can permits be given to people who need them for their shift working pattern? That could make such a difference, above and beyond pay. It needs everyone to come to the table. It sounds incredibly boring to keep talking about getting people together for discussions; however, in my time as a Minister—and as a Back-Bench MP—I have often discovered, on bringing together people who I thought probably had regular conversations, that they never sit down to discuss the issues.

Victoria Prentis: My right hon. Friend is making the most marvellous speech I have ever heard him make, on a number of issues. I regret interrupting him, but I want to echo what he said and suggest that, as we despair slightly of anyone else taking the action in question, perhaps we as a group—with the Minister if he is willing to be involved—could take the baton and go forward. When I was in charge of fundraising as a volunteer at my local hospital, as I was for many years, I offered charitable funds to look at car parking. That was ridiculous, really, but it was an attempt to break through the bureaucratic impasse that we so often came up against. Let us take matters forward together.

Mr Vaizey: I am happy to work with my hon. Friend, particularly considering her back-handed compliment. She has heard hundreds of speeches from me, so for this to be the best she has heard—

Anneliese Dodds: I agree that it is a marvellous speech, and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that. On the point he was making, we must be sanguine, of course, and I am sure that colleagues will be. There is a tension that I have discussed many times with the trust, and with others; it wants a green and pleasant environment for patients and staff, but intensifying car parking, as many want, might go against that. There could also be planning implications. To be fair, the trust is actively looking at the issues.

As to innovation, the new district heating system that has just been put in is pretty unique. We should give credit where it is due, sometimes: it will ultimately save the trust hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Mr Vaizey: I thank the hon. Lady for a course correction in my so-called brilliant speech. I have perhaps been too hard on the NHS management locally to make that point. I am sure that there are hundreds of examples of great innovations that they have introduced. I want to re-emphasise what I said at the beginning of my speech about my huge admiration for nurses, doctors, consultants, surgeons and indeed NHS managers, who do a difficult job. However, I hope that there is appreciation of the frustration that I feel as Wantage Community Hospital’s closure comes up to its second anniversary and there appears to have been no movement.

I do not have time to discuss pay but I noted what my hon. Friend the Member for Henley said. He is a bold and brave advocate for pay locally, and if he thinks that an Oxfordshire weighting is a good idea I am happy to support that, because of his venerable experience in the area. I would be delighted for us to get together as all the MPs of Oxfordshire and with key stakeholders. Personally, I would leave the Minister out of it, because the key message for me in this debate is that Oxfordshire has its issues, but a lot of them can be solved locally.

12.30 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing the debate and on the powerful arguments she made about the recruitment and retention crisis affecting NHS services in her area and across the country.

As the hon. Lady said, the NHS has been a frequently raised issue in recent times, certainly since her election. I join her and the other right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken today in praise of the dedication and commitment of the staff who work in our health service. She said that we are close to a crisis in the NHS. I believe that only the dedication and commitment of staff prevent a crisis from turning into a complete catastrophe. She was also right to say that the good will of staff is propping up services at the moment. That is something that, I am sad to say, I have to keep repeating every time we have a debate: it is the good will of staff that keeps the show on the road.

I was concerned to hear that some staff had approached the hon. Lady to say that some of the levels of experience in particular wards were raising concerns about patient safety. She highlighted in particular the shortage of mental health specialists. She is right to say that the good intention to try to achieve parity of esteem will be extremely difficult to meet when there are so many shortages.

The hon. Lady diagnosed a number of issues that have contributed to causing the crisis. Uncertainty around Brexit has certainly accelerated some of the staffing challenges already in place. The abolition of the nursing bursary has also created issues, and I will come back to that later on. I agree with her that reliance on agency staff is unsustainable, and we can talk about that in a little more detail later. She mentioned the pay cap, as I think every hon. Member did; that is something else I will come back to later, but I remind her that when her party was in government it enacted that policy for a full five years.

The hon. Lady also mentioned staffing shortages in social care. It is sad to hear that those doing one of the most valuable jobs in society feel that they have a better prospect of earning a decent living in retail. That brings home the challenge we face. The issues she raised about training and professional development are also particularly relevant.

The hon. Lady was right to mention that behind all of that is the funding challenge we currently face. We are in the longest and most sustained financial squeeze in the history of the NHS, and it is inevitable that those
kinds of issues will come up until we reach a sustainable funding settlement. She also raised the question of housing and the cost of living in Oxfordshire. I think most hon. Members touched on that point. She said she was concerned that unless the issues are tackled in a comprehensive way, services will be rationed. I am afraid to say that services up and down the country are already being rationed, as we have discussed here on a number of occasions.

It was a pleasure, as always, to hear from the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). She always speaks strongly and passionately about NHS services in her area. She said that staffing issues were a major factor in the proposals to downgrade the maternity unit at Horton. It is a sad fact that half of all maternity units up and down the country have had to turn expectant mothers away at some point in the last year, often due to staffing shortages. We currently have a national shortage of about 3,500 midwives. It was interesting to hear some of the possible initiatives to attract new obstetricians in particular. Certainly, the prospect of free beer is something that works for me, but I do not know whether the hon. Lady can wait quite as long as it will take for me to train in that. I think we will have to do without my particular skills in that area.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of transparency and openness. It is disappointing to hear the difficulties she has had with her local trust on that issue, but it is clear from what she has said today that she has a lot to contribute to the wider health economy in her area. She is not alone on that issue. The Government have been pushing through policies on sustainability and transformation plans, accountable care organisations and the capital expenditure processes, which are all done under a veil of secrecy. There are wider issues in play there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) described the current situation as a perfect storm—an apt description. I am impressed at the way in which she has engaged with staff in the health service in her constituency to get to the real meat and bones of the issues. It was sad to hear that staff feel they are forced to leave the profession and go to work for an agency; she was absolutely right to say that forcing staff to go and work for an agency to make ends meet costs us more in the long term. There are ways in which that could be a saving for us if the pay cap was lifted.

The problems with the nursing bursary were again highlighted, particularly how they are exacerbated in the Oxfordshire area by the cost of living. Has the Minister done any analysis of the cost of living in different parts of the country and the income streams available to those undertaking nursing degrees, who, because of the way the degree is structured, do not have the option of supplemental employment?

My hon. Friend explained very well how the proximity to London creates recruitment difficulties. The stark image of staff living in a corridor highlighted to me the impact of eight years of pay restraint. She also highlighted the bureaucratic nature of recruiting overseas staff. I know immigration policy is outside the Minister’s remit, but I hope he is making representations to the Home Office about how we tackle those issues in future. My hon. Friend highlighted how, despite the Government’s various initiatives for getting people on to the housing ladder, it is still too big a leap for many. We need much more genuinely affordable housing to be built.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). I agree with him that the problem did not start in the last year. He raised the question of challenges in GP practices, particularly younger GPs not feeling able to make the financial commitments to buy into practices, but also the restrictions on operations. He was right to mention that GPs need to move with the times on technology. A number of interesting initiatives are doing that up and down the country, although we have concerns about some of them and how they may exclude patients.

Finally, we heard from the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey). He painted an impressive picture of how healthy the Oxfordshire area is, but a report by the Oxfordshire clinical commissioning group shows a gap in life expectancy of nine years between different parts of the county—something about which the Opposition feel passionately.

It is fair to say, from the right hon. Gentleman’s comments, that the local NHS leadership are not on his Christmas card list. He gave a pretty damning assessment of their ability to engage, but of course the structures we are currently working under were brought in under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which led to the removal of the Secretary of State’s responsibility for much of the system and to the fragmentation with which we are all grappling. I applaud the right hon. Gentleman for his efforts to try to bring everyone together, but he should consider whether the legislative framework we currently work under is fit for purpose. The way in which he has brought people in the NHS together is important and we should be doing more of that. In this particular area, that should not be just on the health economy, but on the wider issues, particularly those relating to cost of living and housing.

As we have heard, the potential impact of the recruitment and retention crisis was brought into stark focus by the issue that sparked the debate: the leaked email from the head of chemotherapy at the Oxford University Hospital’s NHS Foundation Trust that found its way on to the front page of The Times. That memo confirmed to staff that the trust was down on nurses at the day treatment unit by approximately 40%, and as a consequence that the hospital was having to delay chemotherapy patients’ starting times to four weeks. It also stated that there was no prospect of an improvement in the situation for 18 months to two years.

More worrying was a proposal to reduce the number of chemotherapy cycles available to dying patients, which is totally contrary to National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, as well as the national cancer strategy. We were therefore relieved to hear that the trust has now backed down from those suggestions.

Anneliese Dodds: To be clear, as other Members have mentioned, those were not live proposals. The problem was that the trust had to scope out the full range of potential action, given the challenge it was facing. However, the proposals were not something that it wanted to do—quite the opposite. I just wanted to underline that.

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I was not trying to imply that the proposals were live, but the fact they were being considered is of huge concern, which Members have rightly raised. It will be helpful if the Minister could look at what caused the
proposals to even be discussed, because they are contrary to so many of the principles and guidelines that we want in our NHS. I hope he will be able to assure us that those kinds of dramatic measures are not being considered in other areas.

The impact of recruitment and retention issues at the trust extends far beyond chemotherapy. In January, 2,159 patients waited for longer than four hours to be seen in A&E, falling well below the 95% target—a measure that the Health Secretary described as “critical for patient safety”. Even more worryingly, since December eight cancer operations and 26 heart operations were cancelled either the day before or on the day itself. Although that is at the upper end of operation cancellations, it is sadly a story that we now hear up and down the country. Cancelling an appointment at short notice causes immense frustration. It is sometimes unavoidable, but we know that it can have devastating consequences and put patients at unnecessary risk, not to mention the emotional impact. On the practical side, cover has to be arranged, spouses and family members have to arrange their own time off, and sometimes even national or international travel is required.

Staffing shortages are not behind every cancellation, but they will be a factor in many, and the vacancy rate at the trust tells us that it is an increasing problem. As we heard, vacancies at the trust for nurses, midwives and nursing support workers have almost doubled in the past year, from 5.99% in October 2016 to 10.8% in October last year, leaving about 400 whole-time equivalent vacancies. As we have heard from hon. Members, local factors have undoubtedly contributed to that. A 2017 study by Lloyds bank listed Oxford as the most expensive city in the UK, with average house prices 10.7 times average annual earnings. As we have heard, there is some support for the introduction of an Oxford weighting-type arrangement.

There is also a national context to look at, with housing costs being exacerbated by the pay cap. It is clear that, although that is probably at the sharper end of the pressures, Oxford’s issues are being repeated up and down the country. We now know that, after eight years of this Government, more nurses are leaving the NHS than joining. That position is particularly sharp in the Thames valley area, where there were 39% more leavers than joiners between September 2016 and September 2017.

While almost all trusts up and down the country have been unable to fill vacancies, Oxford’s is probably one of the more acute situations. However, much of it was completely predictable. One of the first decisions the Government took in 2010 was to cut the number of nurse training places by 3,000, which has led to about 8,000 fewer nurses nationally. We then had the Health Secretary’s farcical decision to take on the junior doctors, which has led to a demoralised workforce.

Then, to cap it all, as Members have said, came the decision to scrap nurse bursaries, which is possibly the most ill-conceived decision the Government have made—and there is plenty of competition for that particular award. We warned at the time that, far from providing more nursing places, the move would lead to a drop in the number of applications, with the biggest impact being on mature students, who bring a huge amount of experience from outside the profession.

As we have heard, statistics show that there was not only an 18% drop in applications in 2017, but a 2.6% decline in England in the number of students accepted on to courses. Among mature students, 13% fewer of those aged between 21 and 25 were accepted. That decision is discriminatory and stands in stark contrast to the Government’s aims on social mobility. Those are not just my words—they are in the equality assessment undertaken by the Department for Education. However, instead of learning from that lesson, Ministers have decided to scrap NHS bursaries for postgraduate students as well.

Alongside that disastrous decision, we have had the counterproductive capping of pay, which has led to hard-working NHS staff losing money in real terms at the same time as their workload has increased. We have heard encouraging noises from the Government recently, but we have seen no firm action. Perhaps the Minister can provide some clarity when he responds. The Nursing Times reported this week that the Treasury apparently still needs convincing that a rise in wages should be “meaningful”. Will the Minister send his Treasury colleagues a transcript of the debate, to persuade them that a strong case is being made for an increase?

Across Oxfordshire and the whole of our NHS, a recruitment and retention crisis is exacerbating a situation that has already reached crisis point. The Government need to act, realise their mistakes and urgently give hard-working NHS staff the belief that their work is valued and the confidence that their concerns are being listened to.

12.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing the debate. We have met a number of times and I have responded to a number of her written questions, so I know that she is working hard on this subject.

It is always great to hear Members speak personally about their experiences—maybe none more so than my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis)—and how passionately they speak about the national health service. Members from the county of Oxfordshire have spoken well; I do not know how they play in private, but in public they seem like a very good team. That may not be the case in Hampshire; maybe there are too many of us on the Front Bench. We are only a two-party state in Hampshire; perhaps that is why.

The debate is not only important but timely. I had the pleasure of visiting the Churchill Hospital, which is part of the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, last Tuesday during our half-term recess. I saw the superb and innovative cancer care provided by the dedicated staff—I obviously echo all the praise for the staff—and had the opportunity to discuss workforce issues for a little time with the chief executive, Dr Bruno Holthof, who is a very nice man, and his senior team. I therefore hope I can provide some well-informed replies to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon and Members from across the county. The NHS in Oxford is working hard to ensure it has the doctors and nurses to continue to provide excellent care to Members’ constituents.
We met in Maggie’s Oxford cancer centre. As Members will know, I am the cancer Minister—cancer is the thing that gets me out of bed in the morning—and I was blown away by Maggie’s cancer centre. I know there are a lot of them across the country, but this was in a beautiful building, was brilliantly designed and had incredible, passionate staff. I met a number of patients who described Maggie’s as a haven for them while they are going through their cancer treatment. It was great, as always, to talk to patients.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury spoke about the recent story in The Times—the front-page splash on changes to patient cancer treatment plans at the Churchill—which a number of hon. Members mentioned and which I suppose was the spur for the debate, although it seems to have broadened out into everything, covering about four different Government Departments. I, too, was obviously concerned when I saw the story. I called the chief executive of the trust, and he was very clear that, although it would have been a great story, there was only one small problem: it was not true.

The leaked emails—whoever leaked them can examine their own conscience and motives—set out hypothetical challenges and invited suggestions from clinical staff, ahead of a meeting taking place this month. There has been no change to formal policy on chemotherapy treatment at the trust, and any such decision would be a matter requiring clearance at board level anyway. As we discussed, the chief executive’s first consideration was, rightly, the obvious and needless worry caused to cancer patients across Oxford and the wider area. I am pleased, although obviously disappointed it was necessary, that he quickly put in place plans to communicate to his patients that there were absolutely no changes, as the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) said, to chemotherapy treatment.

The trust continues to meet two of the three main cancer waiting time standards and is working hard to meet the third. We discussed that last week, too, and the trust should be very proud of it. I was able to congratulate some of the team personally last week. The trust is considering how best to deliver chemotherapy services going forward, and I am confident that it will do that in the correct way, through the correct channels, and of course in compliance with NICE guidance.

When I was on site at the Churchill, I was able to pop in to the ACE wave 2 pilot. ACE stands for accelerate, co-ordinate and evaluate—I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) enjoys these acronyms. I met Fergus Gleeson, Sara Bainbridge, Shelley Hayles, a local GP in Oxford who leads on cancer, and Julie-Ann Phillips, who is the navigator—a great title—and seems to make it all happen there. I, as a cancer Minister, and we as a Government are very excited about ACE. It is about taking patients with suspected cancer from the GP and into the accelerated diagnostic centre and getting them a diagnosis or clearance quickly. I met patients and saw how much it means to them.

I asked patients about stories on the front pages of national newspapers, which of course are trying to sell national newspapers. I noticed, in relation to the story, which was gleefully run by the BBC that morning once it had read The Times, that by the end of the day the coverage had slightly changed as it realised that it had been reporting fake news all day. I asked patients what they thought about seeing that sort of thing on the front page of The Times while they were receiving world-class cancer treatment in Oxford, and I will not repeat the exact words that they used, but they were very clear about how disappointed they were to see that, and that they did not feel that it represented the professionalism that constituents of hon. Members across this Chamber see. I think that hon. Members can get a sense of what I thought about that story, and I do not take The Times anyway.

Let me start with the global picture, and then I will localise. The dedicated men and women who work in our NHS are of course its greatest asset. The Government have backed the NHS. We have made significant investments in frontline services and are now taking bold steps to plan for future generations. We do, however, recognise the workforce challenges that the NHS faces in its 70th year. That is why the entire system embarked on a national conversation, with the publication by Health Education England in December of “Facing the Facts, Shaping the Future: A draft health and care workforce strategy for England to 2027”, which is designed to stimulate debates such as the one that we are having today. I know that HEE will read the record of this debate.

The strategy sets out the current workforce supply and retention, and the challenges that we face, but also the significant achievements made from work already under way. It is the first step towards a proper plan that stretches beyond any electoral cycle—we must get away from working in that way—and secures the supply of staff for future generations in our health service. The strategy posed a number of questions that will inform a comprehensive strategy for the workforce over the next decade, to be published in July this year. We need to think innovatively about how we can make the NHS workforce fit for the future, and as always in debates about our NHS, we have heard a number of excellent suggestions today. I encourage hon. Members to engage with the consultation, and from what I have heard today, I do not doubt that they will.

We have heard a lot today about recruitment. Of course, that is not the only way to ensure that the NHS has the workforce that it needs to deliver the safe and high-quality care in which I, the Secretary of State and all hon. Members are so interested. We need to ensure that our excellent doctors and nurses want, and are supported, to stay in the national health service, and we have a clear plan to ensure that the NHS remains a rewarding and attractive place to work.

Let me list a few of the things that the plan covers. It includes arrangements for more flexible working—we know that many health professionals are married to other health professionals, and quality of life matters as much as quality of pay—and a system of staff banks for flexible workers across the NHS, increasing opportunities for staff to work on NHS terms and to reduce agency costs for employers. Something else that we discussed last week is a scheme to offer the right of first refusal to NHS employees on any affordable housing built on NHS land, to increase NHS workers’ access to affordable housing with an ambition of benefiting up to 3,000 families. When I got lost while trying to find Maggie’s cancer centre on the Churchill site, I noticed that there is a lot of surplus NHS land on that site, and I know that it is
It is important to note from the outset that although employment.

more than 2,700 nurses have successfully completed the recruitment challenge that other, less affluent areas do not have.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon mentioned continuous professional development, and I promised to mention that. It is a matter for employers; any agreements, such as for protected study time, would need to be negotiated between employer and employees. However, it is always in the best interests of employers to encourage and support the learning and development of their employees. HEE provides national funding to support development of the NHS workforce and invests up to £300 million every year in supporting NHS employees to achieve registered qualifications, and that will continue.

We are increasing the number of nurse training places by 25%. That means 5,000 additional nurse training places every year from September 2018. It is one of the biggest increases in NHS history, and I was glad that the hon. Lady welcomed that in her opening remarks. She also mentioned Brexit, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage did. The Secretary of State and the Prime Minister could not have been clearer: the Government hugely value the contribution of EU staff working in our NHS and understand the need to give them certainty. The Secretary of State has made it clear that after Brexit, we will have an immigration system that means that the NHS is able to get the staff that it needs, not just from the EU but from all over the world.

The hon. Lady asked about career progression; I think that she was referring to scale points earned in the NHS and whether they would transfer. I will get back to her on that; I will get a note to her and copy it to other hon Members in the debate, as I know they will be interested.

Pretty much everyone mentioned the idea of pay weighting for Oxford, as with London, given the proximity of the county. There are a number of mechanisms in the NHS funding and pay system to compensate for higher costs in particular areas. It is open to the independent NHS Pay Review Body to make recommendations on the future geographical coverage and value of such supplements. Additionally, there is flexibility for local NHS employers to award recruitment and retention premiums where recruitment is difficult at standard rates of pay, so when they are having their team get-together—

Ameliese Dodds: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: I will not, because I need to give a minute to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, who introduced the debate.

Pretty much everyone asked about the public sector pay cap. I am glad that everyone recognises and welcomes the fact that we have said that that will be lifted. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), and the hon. Lady leading the debate asked about the timetable. I cannot give an exclusive in this Westminster Hall debate today, but I can say that talks between NHS Employers and the trade unions continue, and I know from my hon. Friend the Minister for Health that they are constructive.

So many other points were raised. They included the future of the Horton. I am told that the decision has been considered by the Independent Reconfiguration Panel and the Secretary of State will consider its advice and recommendations in the next few days. I have a funny feeling that when we have a vote tonight, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury will seek out the Secretary of State.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) left us hanging as to what he is transmitting via the internet with his GP. [Laughter.] Perhaps that is the wrong expression, but his point about primary care at scale and truly integrated services that can take pressure off the NHS was so well made and is exactly what we mean: sustainability and transformation partnerships are about one NHS and bringing NHS services together.

If I have not covered any of the points, I will write to hon. Members. The pressures on the health system are significant. I have talked about the sheer increase in the number of people coming forward needing cancer treatment in the area of the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, and that is true across the NHS. The demands are intense, but the workforce are responding brilliantly. We understand that there is a workforce challenge. That is why we launched the workforce consultation, with which I know hon. Members will want to engage. We look forward to the responses to the consultation exercise, so that collectively we can ensure that the NHS remains the best health system in the world, and the envy of the world, as it celebrates its birthday in June.

12.59 pm

Layla Moran: I end the debate by thanking all my fellow Oxfordshire MPs for their fantastic contributions. I am pleased to see that we are in violent agreement on most of the issues that we face. We also agree that the staff, above all, must be thanked for the work that they do; we cannot say that enough. I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for his remarks, and the Minister. I hope that he can see how passionate we all are about this matter and that we hunt as a pack, so this will not be the last time that he is contacted by us. I look forward to his note and to any answered questions that come back to us on this issue.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order.

Layla Moran: Finally, I would like to thank you, Mr Evans.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I should not have stopped you there, should I?

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Rail Services: Kettering

1 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rail services to and from Kettering.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and I thank Mr Speaker for granting this debate. I welcome the rail Minister to his place. I want to place on record my thanks to the formidable Kettering rail users group and its two main advocates, Christopher Groome and Stuart Porter, who must be among the most able leading amateur rail enthusiasts and timetable experts in the country. Christopher is also chairman of the Leicestershire and Northamptonshire rail action committee. If an organisation could be more formidable than the Kettering rail users group, it would be that organisation. I also praise all the station staff at Kettering railway station. They must be among the nicest, most pleasant and hardest working railway staff anywhere on the system. They are forever courteous and helpful, and go out of their way to ensure the passenger experience is as smooth and trouble free as possible.

I want to make several points to the rail Minister on behalf of my constituents. Railway issues and timetables can get formidably complicated. I do not want to go down that route. I just want to highlight some key issues. The reason for this debate is that the rail franchise through Kettering—the east midlands franchise—is coming up for renewal, and it is important that we get the rail services to and from Kettering right in the next franchise.

The first point the Minister needs to understand is that nowhere on the midlands main line is growing faster in housing development than Kettering, Wellingborough and Corby. They are among the fastest growing places in the whole country, and the railway line through those three constituencies is extremely important.

My second point is that about 10 years ago, when the branch line was reopened to Corby, the main line rail service to and from Kettering northwards was effectively downgraded from a half-hourly service to an hourly service. That was done by the last Labour Government and I am looking to this Conservative Government to right that wrong. They should be able to do that, if the Minister and his officials were to revisit the superb representation made in the franchise consultation by Christopher Groome and Stuart Porter. In their submission, they are not just arguing Kettering’s corner. They are standing back, putting themselves in the rail Minister’s shoes and asking, “How can we help the Minister to develop a new franchise arrangement that will facilitate a better service up and down the line?” The proposals that they advance would reintroduce that half-hourly service.

My third point is that rail fares to and from Kettering are relatively expensive, compared to other rail fares around the country. We effectively have inter-city rail fares, but an increasingly commuter-style service. I am frequently surprised, whenever I travel by rail to any other part of the country, by how cheap rail travel is compared to the expensive fares that passengers to and from Kettering have to pay.

Kettering is effectively at the apex of a Y-shape coming out of St Pancras station. The midland main line comes out of St Pancras in London and goes north.

The first junction is at Kettering, with the Corby branch line. Because Kettering is that junction, it makes sense to reintroduce the half-hourly services, because effectively Kettering is the hub, and that will help all the commuters from Wellingborough, Corby and Kettering to go north. It is important that the rail Minister bears that Y-shape in mind.

The central demand of the Kettering rail users group is for trains to call at Kettering every half an hour, because that will provide platform connections to Wellingborough, Bedford, Luton and Corby. Ideally one service should be from Sheffield and Derby, and one from Nottingham, and then run non-stop to St Pancras. That might be too ambitious in terms of non-stop to St Pancras—but it is the frequency of the service. Once it is less than every half an hour, passenger numbers start to drop off.

Cross-platform connectivity between trains happened very well at Leicester, which is a far bigger station than Kettering, until 2009. That led to a substantial growth in ridership. Since 2009, passenger growth has been suppressed because of the changes made then, particularly for Kettering journeys to Leicester, Birmingham and beyond. Kettering is the optimum hub for the towns in north Northamptonshire and their connectivity to Leicester and beyond.

Fares have been set at inter-city levels for many years to reflect the level of service and comfort. The rolling stock specification, journey times, comfort and capacity need to be of a high-enough standard to justify those inter-city fares and the premium charge, compared with, for example, Northampton to Euston or Huntingdon to King’s Cross fares. Some passengers from Kettering will drive to Northampton or Huntingdon to take advantage of the cheaper fares.

I firmly believe, as does the Kettering rail users group, that we have an opportunity for strong rail growth by restoring Kettering’s half-hourly off-peak service to Leicester. Before we lost that frequency 10 years ago, travel to both Derby and Nottingham was possible via an easy cross-platform connection at Leicester—effectively a half-hourly link to both, with equivalent connections to Birmingham. But train journeys from Kettering to Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds have become car journeys today, due to the reduced frequency to Leicester and beyond. Any delay to a connecting southbound service now leads to an hour’s wait. The risk of that is too high for too many passengers. Corby passengers also suffer an hour’s wait heading north, due to poor connections. When the Corby shuttle comes into Kettering, it is not timed to meet the hourly service going north from Kettering.

A mix of connections and through-services, as suggested by the Kettering rail users group in their submission to the Minister, from Leicester to Kettering, Corby, Wellingborough, Bedford and Luton, is needed to avoid future rail growth from Leicestershire, Nottingham and beyond being replaced by car journeys. It would be a tragedy if the new franchise on the midland main line ended up seeing an increase in car journeys in the east midlands, when we want to see the opposite.

I mentioned at the start that Kettering, Wellingborough and Corby are very fast-growing parts of the world, and that is exemplified by the crowding and overcrowding figures on East Midlands Trains. In May 2017, the East Midlands Trains website showed the following trains as...
could lead to increased car parking, enhanced passenger facilities and an improved station gateway. Land west of the station could be developed as a business innovation centre. There would also be the opportunity to create access from the west, so that local passengers do not need to drive round the one-way system to the other side of the station before accessing trains. If the franchise is got right—if the train pattern in the new franchise encourages passenger growth—Kettering Borough Council is well placed to ensure that the infrastructure at Kettering station is upgraded to help.

Our other problem is that because of the Thameslink timetable changes, passengers from Kettering, Corby and Wellingborough who would take a peak service to Bedford or Luton will now have to do so by bus. That will lead to a dramatic decline in the number of passengers using this rail/bus service, and I urge the Minister to think of a physical rail infrastructure solution. Network Rail could extend the platform or platforms at Bedford to take a shuttle service from Kettering, Corby and Wellingborough while the Thameslink timetable settles down.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that passengers from Kettering, Wellingborough, Luton and Bedford will be badly affected by those journeys and that the franchise should compensate them for their losses, because thousands of people moved to those areas so that they could easily commute to work?

Mr Hollobone: In effect, Thameslink is a very narrow tunnel that goes underneath London, and therefore all the trains that go in and out of it have to be timed exactly to fit on to the other train routes, including the midland main line. That is clearly leading to a bottleneck in our part of the world. I understand that problem, but I believe that there is an engineering solution. There is no doubt that East Midlands Trains will take a huge revenue hit with the loss of passengers using its service. I think East Midlands Trains is doing its best given the constraints placed on it, but the Minister needs to work with Network Rail to see if an engineering solution is possible at Bedford: the extension of a platform and the purchase of a shuttle train that can run backwards and forwards, so that passengers have at least a train service to Bedford instead of having to go on the bus.

It is welcome that electrification is coming to Kettering and Corby. I urge the Minister to consider extending electrification to Braybrooke, and then to Harborough or Wigston, because of the feeds from the national grid. An engineering solution would mean that that could be done at very low cost. Early procurement of bi-modes for the new franchise is needed, because part of the line will be electrified and part will be diesel. There are also easy stretches for upgrading and electrification further north. It would be a shame to break up the engineering teams installing electrification up to Kettering and Corby when, with a little bit of forward planning, they could be sensibly deployed to deal with stretches of the line that can be electrified fairly simply and at low cost. That would not be 100% electrification of the whole line, but other bits north of Kettering could be done at very low cost.

It has been a pleasure to have this debate under your benign guidance and chairmanship, Mr Evans, and I look forward to the Minister’s response.
1.18 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I would like to start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) for securing this debate. I congratulate him on that, and thank the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for contributing. It has been a helpful, if somewhat short, debate. I am keen to respond to the questions that my hon. Friend has put to me, which cover much of the ground that we covered in our very useful meeting with members of the Kettering railway users group and those from the hon. Gentleman’s constituency in Bedford just a few days ago, on 7 February.

I am grateful for the considerable work undertaken by the Kettering rail users group on the complex areas that my hon. Friend mentioned. I hope he will be reassured by the fact that the Department has shared the group’s proposals with Network Rail. Department for Transport officials are in discussions with Network Rail and the train operating companies that were present at the meeting that he and the hon. Gentleman attended—East Midlands Trains and Govia Thameslink Railway—to see whether it is possible to bring life to the proposed engineering solutions: the introduction of a shuttle service involving the extension of a platform at Bedford. A shuttle service between Kettering and Bedford would enable us to remove the bus service mentioned by the hon. Member for Bedford.

I also acknowledge the wider aspirations for rail services in Kettering, as mentioned by my hon. Friend. On the specific aspiration to reintroduce the half-hourly northbound service and occasional faster peak services, Department for Transport officials are giving careful consideration to what will be specified in the next franchise. However, ultimately, it will be a matter for consideration by the bidders for the new franchise. I encourage the Kettering rail users group to engage directly with the bidders to see whether its aspirations can be secured through those bids.

That said, I have listened carefully to the remarks made by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Kettering and the hon. Member for Bedford about their constituents’ recent experiences and their concerns about the immediate plans for rail services through Kettering and affecting Bedford. It is clear that, to a great extent, their constituents have lost patience and confidence in the process, partly due to the lack of consultation—that theme came up in the meeting a couple of weeks ago—on the plans to introduce service changes. I will say more about that.

I apologise to hon. Members, their constituents, and communities that will have to cope with some service reductions in the shorter term are the very people who will benefit in the medium and long term from newer, faster trains, more services, more seats and more destinations.

Mr Hollobone: I appreciate that the Minister has a complicated job; he is playing with a huge train set across the country. The key thing for the midland main line and Kettering services in the long term is to have an eighth train pathway. The present ambition is to have six trains an hour from London; can he confirm that the long-term ambition is to have an eighth train pathway? It would make a lot of the problems go away.

Joseph Johnson: I understand that that is the aspiration. It is right that my hon. Friend is a powerful champion for rail users in his constituency. We are giving careful consideration to all the trade-offs involved in the development of the franchise, and we will be setting out specifications in due course.

I said that I would return to the question of consultation. May 2018 represents one of the largest timetable changes in recent rail history, affecting services across the south-east of England and beyond. The scale, complexity and late emergence of the impact of the planned changes were such that it was not possible for train operators to consult on the changes as they would have done in normal circumstances. I acknowledge that lack of consultation.

Mohammad Yasin: Surely the changes must have been planned months or years before coming into effect, but why was there no consultation? I am sure that the franchises and the Government knew months and years before.

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right: there was a regrettable lack of consultation, which the Government acknowledge and apologise for. It runs counter to the open and transparent approach to service planning and franchise design generally adopted in recent years, and the Government have no hesitation in offering their apologies to my hon. Friend and the
hon. Gentleman for the inconvenience suffered by their constituents as a result and the frustration that they must feel at the lack of consultation on the development of the timetable changes.

In the case of Kettering, once the electrification of the midland main line is complete in 2020, passengers at Corby, Kettering, Wellingborough, Bedford, Luton and Luton Airport Parkway will benefit from a new, dedicated fast commuter service into London St Pancras. The electric trains will be longer, with more seats. In total, a 50% increase is planned in the number of seats into St Pancras during the peak by 2020, with further increases as new rolling stock is introduced on the inter-city services. With the introduction of the new timetable in December 2020, Kettering will become a key interchange between the inter-city services and the dedicated fast commuter service from Corby into London.

In the meantime, let us not forget that the £7 billion Thameslink programme was designed to transform the rail services that are so important to my hon. Friend’s constituents, as is the planned upgrade of the midland main line. From May 2018 to 2020, while the upgrade is being delivered, Bedford and Luton will, as discussed, lose the direct connection from Kettering during the peak. However, the Department has agreed to fund East Midlands Trains to lease three additional high-speed trains to mitigate other adverse impacts.

In addition, as part of the timetable development work, East Midlands Trains has found a way to maintain its existing calls at Luton Airport Parkway in the peak, enabling airport passengers from north of Bedford to continue to enjoy a direct service. When completed, the Thameslink programme, along with the timetable enhancement in 2020, will also open up new connections for passengers with other GTR services from Bedford to Farringdon, as well as to London Bridge and further south. It is not all bad news. We will continue to work closely with my hon. Friend, the hon. Gentleman and their user groups to ensure that their views are taken carefully into account as we specify the work for the new franchise.

Mohammad Yasin: I appreciate what the Minister is saying about the new franchise from 2020, but between May 2018 and 2020, the changes will affect many people who moved to Bedford because they could easily commute from there to work in London and the north. Now, during those two years, they might lose their jobs or be unable to commute to work, so they might already be moving out of Bedford. The damage will be done by 2020. What does the Minister say about that?

Joseph Johnson: I would say that we are working hard to ensure that they get the train services that they need for the future, which will sustain the local economy and give them a viable basis for getting to work and going about their business.

Question put and agreed to.
manufacture and stabling of a significant part of London Underground in the Lillie Bridge depot, which was a major employer of skilled labour. One third comprised two estates of predominantly council housing: Gibbs Green and West Kensington. Around 2,000 of my constituents live there in 760 good quality, spacious, affordable 1950s, 1970s and 1990s low or medium-rise homes.

In place of all that, Capco promised 7,500 high-rise flats, of which only 11% would be additional affordable homes that stretched that definition to its limits by, for the most part, offering nugatory discounts on extortionate market prices. Interestingly, now Capco is aching for a deal—any deal—to get out of the scheme, it does not say, as most developers do, “Look at our viability assessment. It is all that we could afford.” It says, “We did what Conservative politicians asked, and they wanted precious little affordable housing and not one new social rented home.”

At the start of the process in 2008, Capco told me with similar candour that it did not want to include the estates in the master plan. Developing the exhibition centre and depot meant negotiating with a single partner, Transport for London. Bringing in the estates meant not only a political minefield, but buying up the land interests of the hundreds of freeholders and leaseholders who had bought the desirable homes, flats and maisonettes on Gibbs Green and West Ken.

Why did Capco succumb? Because the ideologically driven council in Hammersmith and Fulham decided to attract the attention of its political masters in the Department for Communities and Local Government by showing that whole areas of social housing could be wiped and reconceived as luxury developments—they called it “sweating the asset”. For Capco, demolishing the estates was the price of the Tories’ co-operation with the scheme.

Capco drove a hard bargain. The inequality of arms between developers and local authorities is not unique to Hammersmith. The deal done with TIL on the exhibition sites was hugely preferential to Capco, despite TIL owning the freehold—perhaps the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) was also not trying too hard—but that looks like a master stroke compared with the deal that the Hammersmith Tories did for the estate land.

In 2013, Hammersmith and Fulham Council made a deal to receive £90 million for the estates, plus space in the new development to replace the homes lost. Uniquely in the experience of most planners and developers, however, that sum was not index-linked—as if property prices never rise in central London.

Moreover, the council needed to deliver vacant possession of the land. That meant buying out 171 leasehold and freehold homes, which is normally the developer’s task. The maximum needed to acquire the homes was budgeted as £60 million, although valuation experts assessed the true figure as between £150 million and £174 million. The council has already purchased 26 homes at an average price of £552,000, excluding compensation, which is well in excess of the estimated £350,000.

The true value of the land is not recorded, but reading across from the valuation of the exhibition centre site, which is, suggests that a more accurate figure is around £1 billion. By accepting no more than 10% of the land’s value and by underestimating the costs of acquiring vacant possession, the council could now be left with a zero receipt and a maximum of 672 replacement homes for residents of the estates, having sold 88 homes to cover its shortfall. That will also not guarantee a home for all residents in the new scheme.

For reasons of time, I must return another day to what I regard as one of local government’s great financial scandals: how not just prime land, but whole communities were sold for a song to serve an extreme political agenda of gerrymandering and social engineering. Most of the guilty men of the previous Conservative administration—and they were all men—have taken their poisonous philosophy elsewhere, but Capco still squats on Earl’s Court and West Ken like a toad.

Capco is represented by its chairman, Ian Hawksworth, who is now most famous for being on the guest list for the President’s Club dinner, and Gary Yardley, its managing director, who is quick to pick up lavish bonuses for the granting of planning consents with negligible community benefit and huge community loss. Its development partners are even less savoury. They include Hong Kong-based mega-developers Kwok Family Interests. One of the family, Thomas Kwok, is currently serving a five-year sentence for bribery.

Although I have referred, and will continue to refer, to Capco as the developer, in fact the estates were purchased through an obscure entity called EC Properties LP. The sole partner capital contributed to EC Properties LP is £2 paid in cash by Jersey-registered EC Properties LP Ltd. These and further labyrinthine arrangements appear designed to put Capco in control while shielding it from liability and allowing it to take advantage of offshore tax arrangements.

Before being tempted by the prospect of rich pickings in Earl’s Court, Capco’s business was commercial and retail estate management, specifically through its ownership of Covent Garden. It has no experience as a major land developer, and it shows. It does not have control of the master plan site; it has no option on Lillie Bridge depot, which is owned by TIL; the estate residents, through their lawyers, dispute that the conditional land sale agreement for the estates is enforceable; and now the deliverability of its scheme has been further undermined by the sale of the Empress State building.

Capco’s scheme, the value of which fell by 20% in 2016, includes £1.8 billion of enabling infrastructure costs. At £148 per square foot, that is more than three times the cost of larger development schemes in London. Other residential developers have commented on Capco’s extreme construction costs, which are thought to be 30% to 45% above the market rate.

Capco’s assumptions for residential value, which are significantly higher than the local market and schemes elsewhere in London, have not been realised. Sales are slower than expected: flats have been selling at a rate of less than one a week. At one point it was selling one flat a fortnight, at which rate it would take more than 150 years to sell the entire scheme, yet the business plan relies on a high sales rate of 480 private homes a year. Unsurprisingly, Capco has tried in recent months to sell some or all of the site to overseas investors in America, South Africa, Japan, China and Saudi Arabia, but it has had no takers. Frankly, any developer, however much of a gambler, would be beyond reckless to take any of the Earl’s Court site off Capco’s hands.
With no money in the scheme and none from outside, Capco’s only other option is to return to planning and come up with a new master plan with increased heights and density. Sadly for Capco, that option also looks like a dead end. With Eric Pickles at the Department for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip as Mayor in City Hall, and Stephen Greenhalgh in Hammersmith Town Hall, anything was possible, but the political weather has changed. Now Sadiq Khan is Mayor and has very different ideas about what constitutes affordable and sustainable development. He has also made a strong commitment to tenants’ ballots and said that he wants “to make sure people living on social housing estates...are at the heart of any decisions” involving demolition. Stephen Cowan, the Labour leader of Hammersmith and Fulham Council, has described the Earl’s Court scheme as “unviable” and “undeliverable” and called on Capco to return the estates to the council. He has the full support of the North End ward Labour candidates, Councillor Larry Culhane, Councillor Daryl Brown and Zarar Qayyum. It appears that he also has the support of the deputy leader of Kensington and Chelsea, Councillor Kim Taylor-Smith, who spoke about the scheme at a meeting of the full council on 24 January.

On Monday, I wrote to the chief executive of EC Properties, whose parent company is Capco, to seek a meeting to consider the site’s future. I told him that on 14 June the facts on the ground in Kensington had changed. I wrote:

“I want to make it very clear that I do not believe the continuation of this development under the current terms is right. And, as a minimum, if this is to continue I want to see more social and more truly affordable housing included in this scheme.”

I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) present, because part of the site is in her constituency. As she knows, my reference to 14 June was to the Grenfell Tower fire.

So what happens now? It is too late for the exhibition centres that were demolished in an act of vandalism, but it is not too late to build an acceptable replacement on the site. It is far from too late for the Lillie Bridge depot, which is still owned by TfL, to undergo sympathetic redevelopment to preserve necessary infrastructure for the tube and new affordable homes. If hon. Members will forgive me, however, I will turn my focus to the estates, or rather to the people who live there.

I first got to know West Ken and Gibbs Green in 1985 as the newly selected council candidate for Gibbs Green ward. The first campaign that I had to fight was to stop the then Tory council putting a relief road through the West Ken estate. It has been a pleasure to represent the area as a councillor and MP for 28 of the past 32 years. Although on aggregate it is a low-income community, it includes people from every walk of life, ethnicity, nationality and profession.

Residents reacted with horror to the prospect of demolition of their homes. At first, there was no guarantee of rehousing in the area—only the statutory requirement to rehouse secure tenants in suitable alternative accommodation. Even when residents were told that homes would be available on the site, there were strings attached. Homeowners, private tenants and households who moved into the estates after the land sale agreement was signed in 2013 have no guarantee of finding a replacement home in the area on eviction. Secure council tenants who move into the first phase of replacement homes could see their service charges triple to between £2,500 and £3,500 a year on top of rent. Having been initially promised like-for-like replacement homes, residents who currently have spacious flats and houses built in the 1960s and 1970s, some of which have gardens and off-street parking, have now been told simply that replacement homes will meet the legal minimum size standard. Even if the developer had the finances and political support to begin evicting residents tomorrow, redevelopment of the estates would still take at least 20 years to complete.

Residents have done everything they can to make it very clear what they do not want: demolition. In December 2009, a year after learning of the possible demolition of their homes, residents from 83% of households on the West Kensington and Gibbs Green estates signed a petition to oppose it. In March 2012, 80% of residents who responded to the Council’s consultation on the scheme said no to demolition.

Residents have also been very clear about what they want instead: community ownership. In March 2011, they formed West Ken Gibbs Green Community Homes, a community-controlled not-for-profit organisation with membership from more than two thirds of households on the estates. It was set up with the intention of exercising council tenants’ right to transfer.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his powerful speech. Does he agree that residents could do a lot worse than learn from the community ownership experience in a neighbouring estate? Wallerton and Elgin Community Homes was set up in the face of a threat from Westminster City Council in the late 1980s. It has proved to be one of the most successful and popular models for social housing in the country. Does he agree that that experience shows exactly the approach we should take when estates are threatened?

Andy Slaughter: It is a pleasure to see my hon. Friend in the Chamber. I am not surprised to hear her champion one of the most successful community-held developments in the country. I will say a little more about that development before I conclude my speech.

The right to transfer allows council tenants to choose a different landlord for their area. The objective of West Ken Gibbs Green Community Homes is to become the community-controlled landlord for its members’ homes. For four years, it lobbied the Government to implement the necessary legislation to enable it to use the right to transfer under the Housing Act 1985, as amended by the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008. The necessary regulations came into force in December 2013, and in March 2015 members voted 100:1 to serve a right-to-transfer proposal notice. That is a comfort to those whose priority is simply to remain in their homes. Some residents have lived on the estates with friends and neighbours for 30, 40 or even 50 years and dread the disruption of redevelopment and forced transfer.

Estates are home to people who are the lifeblood of our towns and cities. Many residents are people on minimum wage or zero-hours contracts, who feel the rising costs of living the most. Demolishing and
marginalising social housing will not work; more importantly, it dehumanises an entire category of people. Certain councils and developers generalise about social housing tenants. They assume they know better than the tenants what is good for them, and they tell them to be grateful when their homes are under threat. That is what the Conservatives did before agreeing the sale to Capco, describing estates as “not decent neighbourhoods”, “barracks for the poor” and “ghettoes of multiple deprivation”. Is it any wonder that communities such as West Kensington and Gibbs Green are bidding to take control and ownership for themselves?

So residents came up with the people’s plan, which shows the professionals how new development ought to be done. At the outset, Community Homes brought more than 100 residents into workshops and site visits with architects. Residents and architects together identified space for up to 327 new homes and devised plans for improvements to their homes, streets and community spaces. The plans were costed and valued, and residents were able to show that they could help to pay for improvements and subsidise the building of new homes at social rent levels through sales. Residents from 65% of households provided written feedback on these proposals, and 90% of respondents said that the plans were “excellent” or “good”, and “better” or “far better” than the Capco scheme. Here is some of their feedback:

“Everybody is trying to save our homes from these rich people. What do you want to destroy people’s lives for? For money?”

“I like that there is a plan to build new homes but I can keep my home. I don’t understand why they are going to demolish decent homes.”

“The most important thing is that we get to stay. I love it here. We know each other and look out for each other.”

I have two final things to say. First, I thank everybody in the community at West Kensington and Gibbs Green, and their supporters and advisers, for the struggle of the last 10 years. It has been gruelling, and 2,000 people have had their lives on hold, unable to move on with everything from modernising their home to planning their family’s future. However, it has created a fantastic community spirit and inspired people to create their own vision for the future.

Even before the political climate began to thaw, I knew that we would win, because I have known people such as Sally Taylor and Diana Belshaw, the chairs of the West Ken and Gibbs Green residents’ associations, and Keith Drew, the chair of West Ken Gibbs Green Community Homes Limited, for 20 years and more. They are strong Fulham people who are standing up for their communities, and they are not daunted by the dirty tricks of the developer and its political cipher.

I am delighted that so many residents have been able to attend this debate. I apologise if I cannot name them all, but they stand for the hundreds and thousands of people on the estates who have fought for their homes and their livelihoods over many, many years. That battle is not over, but there is at least some light at the end of the tunnel.

As I say, there are too many people for me to name, but I cannot leave out Jonathan Rosenberg, the community organiser for these 10 years, who brought not only his absolute focus and determination to an often exhausting David and Goliath battle, but 30 years of experience of community housing. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) knows, Jonathan is the chair of Walterton and Elgin Community Homes, which is in her constituency. He is a slayer of Shirley Porter and a champion of tenants’ rights. Jonathan has been ably assisted by a number of professional advisers—accountants, architects and planners—and by community activists across both boroughs, and indeed by residents who have turned up, often when everything looked hopeless and bleak, time and again to assert the identity of their community.

I must also mention Dave Hill, the former Guardian journalist who now runs—I will give it a blatant plug—the “On London” website, which he is crowdfunding for. Dave has written dozens and dozens of articles to expose what has gone on in West Ken and Gibbs Green over the last 10 years. I do not always agree with everything that he says—he is a good, independent journalist—but he has chronicled what I am afraid to say lazier and more partisan journalists would have otherwise missed. It is good that we have it all on the record.

In conclusion, I have only a couple of simple requests to put to the Minister. I know that, new as he is to his post, he will have listened attentively. From my time holding the justice brief, I know that he is serious and has intellectual weight, and I hope that he will give me good news today. First, will he please determine the Community Homes application for the right to transfer, which his Department has been waiting to determine for more than two years? When he does so, can he please heed the residents’ call for him to uphold their legal right to take back control—a phrase I am sure he is keen to hear in this Chamber—of their community, so that they can deliver the homes that we need?

Secondly and more broadly, I ask the Minister to get the Government, including his Department, to work with the residents, the boroughs and the Greater London Authority—they are all now of one mind, a very different mind from the one of 10 years ago—to provide decent, genuinely affordable homes across the Earl’s Court site for families? That perhaps includes families from Grenfell, and thousands of others who are in overcrowded, unfit and unaffordable accommodation in two of London’s most expensive boroughs.

This situation should not be seen as a tragedy but as an opportunity. If there is going to be redevelopment, it should be sympathetic and sustainable, and in the interests of the people who need it most. They are the people who need social and affordable housing in Hammersmith and Fulham, and in Kensington and Chelsea.

1.54 pm

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Like many Kensingtonians, I have a long history with Earl’s Court exhibition centre. As a child, I visited the Bertram Mills circus, when they had performing animals; it was the “olden days”. I also attended the Royal Tournament, countless Ideal Home exhibitions, and—of course—some of those amazing concerts. However, the site is not just part of my story. It was, and could be again, a thriving and well-used commercial centre, comprising a third of our country’s exhibition space, and providing jobs and customers all year round for our local hotels, restaurants, shops and pubs—remember pubs?

According to the Greater London Authority, Earl’s Court exhibition centre generated £1 billion of business a year. Now, however, it has been flattened and all that
business has gone elsewhere. I remember those crazy days eight years ago when Hammersmith and Fulham Council was under a different administration, and the then director of housing and homelessness was exposed for vile racist views, including, in the context of the estates, expressing a wish to “bulldoze the ghettos”.

Enter Capco, the social cleanser’s friend. Its plans, promoted as being “sensitive” to local context and character, put on the Kensington side a forest of lumpen, bland, blocky chunks of real estate with brick cladding, where no one would ever live; shopping streets where no one would ever shop; and a “river park” without a river or, indeed, anything like a park, and where, despite the optimistic visuals, small blonde children would not play with red balloons.

Facing Warwick Road, in place of our beautiful and now demolished art deco facade, would be a bizarre pair of supposedly landmark buildings that I am sorry to say are reminiscent of Italian fascist architecture. Put simply, world-renowned architect Terry Farrell, whose work I have known for many years, had apparently transported a piece of one of his Chinese cities into our beloved borough. It was a cut and paste job, and was very disappointing.

In May 2015, I had the pleasure of speaking at a seminar at South Bank University, called—enticingly—“Politics with Planning”, which is my favourite combination. I was up against the chief executive of Capco, Gary Yardley. I expressed my misgivings about the proposals for Earl’s Court. How he sneered, because he was reimagining a chunk of our heritage. Who was I to question him? After all, the 14% social housing on offer, or 10% based on floor space, was all that the poor thing could offer, because he had consultants. And this is what Section 106 Consultants says to its developer clients, “if a Section 106 viability report cannot entirely extinguish your liability to provide Section 106 affordable housing”, then all is not lost. It says that much may yet be achieved, either “through delivering...affordable housing of a type...that is more valuable to you”—that is, to the developer—“or identifying and prioritising those types of contribution that are most important to the Local Planning Department.”

Let us hope that the days of cosy relationships between developers and planning departments are well and truly over.

How the world has changed. Three years on, Capco is on the ropes, its share value plummeting due to the local luxury housing over-provision, and the heat has been taken out of the market, by, among other factors, fears over Brexit. Capco’s recent half-hearted attempt to intensify the provision of units at Earl’s Court—to provide more small housing units that it thought it could sell, rather than the huge and unwanted super-prime units of its dreams—seems to have hit a brick-clad wall.

Politically, culturally and in terms of local need, the scene has changed dramatically. The international appetite for buying flats to park money—sometimes dodgy money—I was warned, and it seems that even Capco has accepted that. It had hoped its desire to intensify Earl’s Court could be agreed within the current planning permission, but that is not happening.

Let us not compound the litany of errors and developer greed with yet another round of international online bookers using our neighbourhoods as chips, to sell the site abroad. Local house prices are plummeting—or what the estate agents call “softening”—and there is no longer any taste for these super-luxury developments that have turned parts of London into ghost towns. The current plan is undeliverable; we need to start again. We need to curtail the developers’ rampage through our neighbourhoods and look to a future at Earl’s Court that does not offer empty units for international investors but instead satisfies local needs and provides homes for existing residents.

After the atrocity of the fire at Grenfell Tower, we have seen a dramatic change of heart at Kensington and Chelsea Council, which we need to consolidate and compound with a completely new approach to the development at Earl’s Court. We need to listen to our constituents, who are the experts on what is needed, now, at Earl’s Court. The Save Earl’s Court campaigners are relentless, intelligent and forward-thinking and have good and achievable ideas.

The UK is desperate for exhibition space and London lags dangerously behind in its offer to those who need large exhibition centres. Earl’s Court is struggling, with local shops and restaurants closing and hotels clinging on by their fingernails, ironically propped up by the council using them as temporary accommodation. The heart has been ripped out of Earl’s Court and we need to put it back.

The deputy leader of Kensington and Chelsea Council has stated that communities must take the lead in future developments. Let us trust them, and listen to the knowledgeable and conscientious Save Earl’s Court campaigners, all our local residents and Councillor Wade. They have been working on proposals for an environmentally sustainable and very green exhibition centre with social rented housing on site, offering a green lung in an area of terrible air quality and with jobs on the doorstep. Demolishing estates of social housing is not the answer to deprivation; working with communities is the way forward. We must set the current undeliverable plans aside and start again.

The world has changed since the repellent comments were made by the former Hammersmith and Fulham director of homelessness; we are better than that now. The world has also changed since 14 June 2017, when the result of poor maintenance, lack of care and absence of social conscience was exposed to the world with the Grenfell Tower fire. Let us show that change now by finding ways to realise our constituents’ ambitions. Let us leave the 2,000 residents of my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) in peace to enjoy and manage the homes built with conscience and care over the past 50 years. On my side, at Earl’s Court, let us support a struggling area that has been decimated by developer greed, by working closely with the London Mayor and the Government to repeal the current planning permission where possible and work with the people of Earl’s Court to provide socially rented and truly affordable housing for those who need it, cleaner air, and a fantastic modern exhibition centre that will provide jobs and return vital business. Let us get them out of those hotels.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): If there are no other Back-Bench speeches, I call the Front-Bench spokespeople.
Tony Lloyd, usually you would have five minutes. I am sure that you will use your discretion and allow the Minister enough time to respond to the matters.

2.2 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). He made a powerful speech that was clearly embedded in the needs of the people he represents, some of whom have come here today to hear the debate and others of whom will want to know the outcome. I say kindly to the Minister that there is a real expectation that today we begin to move the long-running saga of Capco’s plan forward in a way that is acceptable to the local residents.

If I may, I will set the debate in a wider context, going back to before the Grenfell fire. It has been recognised that the policy of owner occupation being the only viable form of tenancy, which was driven during the bulk of the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition and in the early days of the present Government, had to change, in the face of the reality of what modern Britain is all about. It is worth putting on record some of the national statistics that are part of the process faced by people in this part of London. Since 2010, there has been a 50% increase in the number of people who are unintentionally homeless and are deemed to be a priority, people who desperately need rehousing and regarding whom our local authorities have a duty to respond. The local authorities find that extremely difficult of course, because of the lack of available properties.

Those who present themselves to local authorities as unintentionally homeless are only part of the picture. Many families and individuals are in inadequate, overcrowded housing, perhaps living with parents or other relatives. We know that the need for affordable social homes is massively greater than that illustrated by the unintentionally homeless figures. It is a scandal that some 120,000 children nationwide are in temporary accommodation—and the number is growing. In London in particular, in recent years there has been a tripling in the number of people described as rough sleepers, people who have been abandoned by our society in many ways.

That is all part of the background. So why is this? It is because policies dictated to take out social housing—affordable housing for people who need it—have been massively detrimental. That is what the ideologues my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith talked about earlier wanted to achieve. Since 2010, we have seen a 174,000 reduction in the number of council properties nationwide. According to the Chartered Institute of Housing, 150,000 social housing units have been lost, and it is predicted that a further 80,000 will go between now and 2020. At the same time, in 2010 there were 40,000 social housing starts and in the most recent year the figure was down to 1,000. Frankly, this is a crisis that has been made at political policy level, because of incompetence and the unacceptability of developers taking control of our planning process.

Something has gone drastically wrong, and the situation in Earl’s Court and West Kensington fits into that national trend. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith made the point forcefully that there is something fundamentally wrong when developers can sweat assets that are people’s homes, land on which perfectly adequate estates and communities make their lives. That is not sweating assets; it is prostituting national resources in the interests of developer profit and it cannot be acceptable. Nor can it be acceptable that simply because the market is turning and Capco no longer sees the development as viable we now have the possibility of a change of policy. The policy should never have been allowed in the first place, putting, as it does, people’s lives and homes at risk.

Everything I know of the situation my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith has talked about says that this is a collection of viable estates of popular homes. I understand there are very few voids, empty properties—I think my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith confirms that—and that they are properties that are not so old and not really in enormous need of repair. With that background, the idea of destroying those homes simply to allow the sweating of assets—in fact, to allow people to make enormous amounts of money—does not fit in with the social values we ought to espouse. Even the Government have now begun to espouse those values, as they talk in a slightly more nuanced language about the need to develop more affordable social housing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith made some important points about the situation that would be unacceptable anywhere. “Like for like” should be the minimum requirement of any transfer for individuals. It is not like for like when we know that people who have substantial properties will be offered properties with minimum space standards—whatever that means. In fact, it increasingly means much reduced standards and therefore a lower quality of life. My hon. Friend talked about people possibly seeing a tripling of service charges to £3,500 a year, and that is not a small amount of money. It would have a significant impact on people’s incomes, and it simply is not sustainable. Given that background, there is something fundamentally wrong with the model. Residents are rightly looking not only to the local authority—it now has a different political complexion and a different view of the situation—but to central Government to see what they can do to alter the situation.

My hon. Friend asked for specific things from the Minister. The Minister should look at the capacity of the right to transfer. If that issue has been on his predecessor’s desk for two years, it needs to be brought to a conclusion. I hope today he can begin to move that process on. My hon. Friend also talked about the need for the provision of affordable housing. There is something fundamentally wrong in the design of a new area that is supposed to have some 7,500 properties when the number of affordable homes would be less than the number being taken out. In the world in which we now live, the proportion of affordable homes should be significantly in excess of replacement. It should make some real impact on the dire need for social homes—affordable social homes at that—in London in particular. I hope the Minister will comment on what that means for future developments such as this and what the Government can do to begin to bring pressure to bear on Capco.

In conclusion, my hon. Friend has brought a shocking story to the House. The support that my hon. Friends the Members for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) and for Westminster North (Ms Buck) have brought is important. I congratulate the residents of the area.
Tony Lloyd

Their 10-year fight is not yet over, but had they not been prepared to stand up to Capco and the developers, the issue most certainly would have been finished long ago with them in massively inferior conditions to what they now have. I hope that where we are today promises something better for the future.

We look to the Minister for a credible response. The saga is complicated because a lot of the control rests with the developer, but the developer is now on the ropes. I hope he accepts that it should not depend on changing market conditions for us to have a more rational housing policy that says that the rights of existing viable communities should not be wiped out simply to sweat those assets to make more money. The Government’s changing attitude says that that is the wrong situation for us to be in, and I hope the Minister will confirm that.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I know that in responding to the debate the Minister will allow a couple of minutes for Mr Slaughter to wind up.

2.13 pm

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. As is the custom, I congratulate the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing this debate. We have sparred many times on justice matters, and I take note of all the hon. Gentleman’s points regarding the Earl’s Court and West Kensington area. He will know that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has been asked to make a decision on two specific matters submitted for his determination. The determination requests are currently being considered in the Department. The hon. Gentleman made some specific requests that I want to address clearly. As a lawyer and an assiduous local MP, he will know that that process precludes me, for legal and propriety reasons, from commenting specifically on the regeneration proposals for the Earl’s Court and Kensington area. As he knows, to do so would prejudice the very decision making he is calling for. Notwithstanding those limits, in his usual deft way he has highlighted his concerns over the Earl’s Court project while also raising—the shadow Minister did this, too—wider issues relating to social housing and the place for regeneration within that. I will say as much as I conceivably can.

Members will know that social housing is a priority for this Government. Last year we announced a review to examine the issues affecting social housing. To help inform the Green Paper we have spoken directly with more than 7,000 people through online surveys. Notwithstanding the fact I have only been in this post for a short time, I have been to two workshops this year in Basingstoke and for Lancaster West residents in north Kensington. I hope that reassures the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). Those workshops and the wider feedback have made a profound impression on me. We have an important opportunity to look afresh at the sector. A lot of the wider points that Members have made will feed into, touch on and resonate with some of the issues we will be grappling with. We will publish the Green Paper this year for consultation, and I look forward to engaging with all Members at that point on those wider policy issues as we strive to get the best out of the social housing sector.

More broadly, the Government are increasing the supply of homes and implementing policies that help people to access housing, whether they are renting or looking to buy in whichever sector, private or social. In 2016-17, which is the last year for which we have full figures, nearly 220,000 net additional homes were delivered. There were more than 41,000 affordable housing completions, which was up 27% on the previous year. We saw nearly 145,000 completions on the Help to Buy equity loan scheme by the end of September 2017.

Building affordable homes is a top priority for this Government. Since 2010, we have delivered more than 357,000 new affordable homes. In relation to the specific issues raised by the hon. Member for Hammersmith, about one quarter of those homes have been delivered in London. The Prime Minister recently announced an additional £2 billion of funding for affordable housing. That will increase the affordable homes programme budget to more than £9 billion. The new funding will support councils and housing associations to build more affordable homes where they are needed most: where families are struggling with rental costs and some may be at risk of homelessness.

The shadow Minister raised the issue of affordable housing in the wider context, and the hon. Member for Hammersmith made a number of political points. I hope both will forgive me for pointing out a few basic undeniable facts about affordable homes in Hammersmith and Fulham. Affordable home delivery in Hammersmith and Fulham in 2016-17 was 28% of the level of the last year of the previous Conservative administration. In the same year, Hammersmith and Fulham delivered 15% of the affordable housing that Wandsworth delivered. I note that as a matter of balance with the account of the borough given today by Members. It is worth putting it in some perspective. Nevertheless, across the political aisles and across the country—the issue is most acute in relation to London, where there is a serious housing shortage and high demand—I think we all are clear about our ambition and restlessness to go much further.

At the autumn statement in 2016, we agreed a record-breaking £3.15 billion package of funding for affordable housing in London to deliver at least 90,000 new affordable homes by March 2021. In addition, London will also get a share of the extra £3.4 billion investment in the affordable homes programme announced recently. Since 2010, we have delivered more than 357,000 new affordable homes, and about one quarter of them have been in the capital.

As London struggles to build enough homes to keep pace with demand, attention is naturally turning to the broader options regarding the regeneration of housing estates. Estate regeneration done the right way can create new improved homes and communities for the people who live there. It can increase the supply and quality of homes through densification and design.
Those two can be viewed as a win-win, rather than a zero-sum game. Savills has estimated that in London there is capacity to provide more than 54,000 additional homes using a street-based model. The Government published a new estate regeneration national strategy in December 2016, which supports local partners to improve how they do estate regeneration in partnership with residents to drive better quality housing, local growth and wider opportunities for the residents of local communities.

To give some examples of good practice, in the north Solihull area of Birmingham, a focus on education with the local community infrastructure amenities has led to an increase in educational standards. The regeneration set out to change the lives of 40,000 people by building schools and creating new village centres with improved health and enterprise facilities. The best estate regeneration schemes make the community central to the project.

The Spirit Quarters redevelopment in Coventry is a resident-led scheme. They have set up three social enterprises: a community café, a neighbourhood centre and a business centre. In addition to the physical transformation, there have been improvements in many social and economic outcomes. Overall, reported crime in the area is down by almost 20% and the number of residents claiming jobseeker’s allowance has reduced by 44%. The percentage of students leaving school with five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C has increased from 5% to 33%. Those are all incredibly positive outcomes.

The issue of tenant participation has been raised by hon. Members. Residents are clearly key partners in any regeneration scheme. They should have opportunities to participate from the start, developing the vision, design, partner procurement and delivery. Working with residents can help to build trust and consensus on regeneration. I have said this numerous times since taking on this portfolio: we need to build more homes, but we also need to build up stronger communities, too.

It is particularly important that residents have the opportunity to express their views on the final options for regeneration, whether as individuals or through the democratic process more generally. The way that is done should be agreed locally. That is the template for the national policy that we put out. The regeneration should have the support of a majority of the residents whose lives will be directly affected. At the Wornington Green estate in north Kensington, support for the regeneration was helped by early and ongoing conversations with residents. It included a resident steering group, regular outreach, independent advice and advocacy, regular public meetings, and training for residents.

It is important to set out a clear set of commitments about how the regeneration process will work and what housing options are available. Providing security and confidence through a charter early on is one option for helping to establish trust and foster positive discussions about the scheme. All existing council and housing association tenants, whether on a lifetime or fixed-term tenancy, should have the option to return to the estate. It is a legal requirement for leaseholders to be compensated if their home is demolished. However, we expect that schemes will go further and offer leaseholders a package that enables them to stay on the estate or at least close by.

It is important that home purchase options are made available. Residents should be given the opportunity to change tenure if they so wish. Regeneration can help first-time buyers get a foot on the housing ladder and provide opportunities for tenants to own their homes. Shared ownership has an important role to play in helping those who aspire to home ownership but cannot afford to buy. For example, residents of the Rayners Lane estate in Harrow have been guaranteed the right to remain in affordable housing on the estate, with the extra 260-plus homes creating a vibrant mixed-tenure community through the introduction of outright sale and shared ownership. All of that requires strong leadership from local authorities.

Our strategy highlights the importance of devolution and the leadership role of local authorities working with their communities to support estate regeneration. We have seen good examples of that type of strategic leadership and co-operation. Notwithstanding the criticisms that have been made, I hope we will not throw the baby out with the bathwater and lose sight of the good examples and the positives.

Andy Slaughter: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dominic Raab: I will make a little more progress and the hon. Gentleman can comment at the end.

Combined authorities in the Tees valley, the west midlands and Greater Manchester are now tackling housing and regeneration alongside transport, infrastructure and skills as they take a more holistic approach. Strategic regeneration plans can act as the catalyst for delivering place-based services and infrastructure through, for example, new community hubs and schools that service the areas being regenerated.

Opposition Members have sometimes accused me of focusing too much on London and the capital. However, the regeneration of Anfield in north Liverpool has focused not only on housing, but on the place as a whole, including the commercial offer and the wider infrastructure. Your Housing association, Liverpool football club and Liverpool City Council created a partnership that enabled them to consider the needs of the community across the whole Anfield area. That was important and is a good example of the strong joint partnership and long-term community engagement that has transformed Anfield into a place where people want to live.

Andy Slaughter: I appreciate the tone of the Minister’s speech and what he said about not giving a view on the regeneration scheme. However, may I press him a little on two points? First, if he cannot say what his position is, can he indicate—this is not unreasonable after two years—when there is likely to be a decision on the right to transfer? Secondly, there are many regeneration schemes, but so many of them involve a reduction in the number of social rented homes. When we have a new deal for Earl’s Court and West Kensington, will he agree to work with the other players there to ensure that we preserve and enhance the existing community?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman has made his point in a constructive and reasonable way. I appreciate his frustration on the time issue. After the length of time and all the issues that have been churned over, no one will say this has been done in a rushed way, but we
need to take the time required to get the decision right. I cannot give him a specific timeframe, but we will move as expeditiously as we can. I certainly will take back to the Department the point that he has made.

On the wider question, we have an opportunity through the social housing Green Paper. We will collate the extraordinarily wide range of feedback we have had. We will put that into the proposals through a Green Paper for consultation. I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman and hearing from him at that stage.

In conclusion, I want to make sure this debate does not lose sight of the fact that local regeneration can offer enormous scope to build more homes and at the same time build up our local communities, which, whatever side of the political argument we sit on, is the shared objective. It requires ambition from local authorities, which many are providing. It also requires that residents have a strong voice in the process to shape the local plan, and support from central Government, which London and many other communities are receiving, not least with the homes infrastructure funding that has been made available. It also requires strong leadership to carry local communities with us.

2.27 pm

Andy Slaughter: I am glad we had a civilised debate, but that does not detract from the fact that what has happened, particularly to the tenants and residents of the West Kensington and Gibbs Green estates over the past 10 years, has been an outrage. It would not have been tolerated were this not an area of social housing. Threatening to demolish 750 private homes in the same way simply would not happen. All we ask is that similar standards are adopted. That is why I am delighted with the Mayor’s new guidelines and his wish to use his own power and economic clout to ensure that tenants are fully consulted in future.

I want to make two or three quick points. I accept that local authorities can always do more and that it is very difficult to build genuinely affordable housing in London, where land values are high, but it is not impossible. I do not want to dwell on the political past, but I will give one statistic: in the past three years of Conservative control in Hammersmith and Fulham, the number of social rented homes actually fell. It is the only borough in London where that happened. I would be willing to draw a line under the past and to accept at face value what the Government say and what some Conservative councils now say about a new commitment to social rented homes. I suspect the new settlement will not be until after the local elections because Capco, like all desperate gamblers, will want one more throw of the dice to see if it can get a more sympathetic administration. I suspect it will be unlucky on this occasion, not only in Hammersmith but in Kensington. I invite the Minister to work with all players after that time to ensure that we begin to build the homes that Londoners need and can afford.

I end where I began by thanking everybody who has taken part in the debate, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), and for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who are passionate about these issues, as I am. Most of all I thank the tenants and residents not only for giving up their day and being here—they have given up so many days—but for everything they have done for their community. By resisting the demolition that was due in the area, they have prevented it from happening to other communities in Hammersmith and elsewhere. For that we all owe them an undying debt of gratitude.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered social housing and regeneration in Earl’s Court and West Kensington.

2.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 21 February 2018

[Mr Virendra Sharma in the Chair]

Leaving the EU: No-deal Alternatives

9.30 am

Antoinette Sandbach (Edgshbury) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered alternatives to a no-deal outcome in negotiations with the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.

Up until now we have focused on the binary choice between the Government successfully achieving a good Brexit deal or a departure on the terms of the World Trade Organisation that almost nobody wants. That stands in stark contrast to the promises of senior leavers prior to the referendum. We were promised that Britain would have access to the single market and told that the idea that our trade would suffer is silly. Now we face leaving the single market and, in the worst-case scenario, on WTO terms. We were promised that there would be no change to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Now we see that there are huge uncertainties about the issue of the Irish borders, with a few hon. Members even going so far as to criticise the Good Friday agreement.

We were promised that an EU trade deal would be the easiest in human history. Now we see just how ambitious that claim was. This is why I am calling this debate: we were promised a smooth and simple exit from the EU, and instead we have complexity and the risk of chaos. It is even more important now in light of the leaked letter from a small minority of my colleagues. These hard-line Brexiteers have a very strange view of Brexit would be around 8% of GDP over the next 15 years. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.

First, I would like to outline why a no-deal or WTO-terms Brexit would be quite so chaotic. A WTO-terms hard Brexit is greeted by some of my colleagues with considerable sangfroid. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) told the “Today” programme last year that “we will do just fine” if we leave on WTO terms. He was joined earlier this week by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chwyd West (Mr Jones), whom I see in his place, who told the Daily Express:

“I am entirely happy to continue trading with the EU on WTO terms.”

I am afraid that I and many others are not entirely happy with this. Some 43% of UK trade is with the EU and I am not willing to see that prosperity put in jeopardy. It would be economically catastrophic to simply walk away from the negotiating table, crashing out.

Crashing out with no deal would lead to a reduction in EU trade of between 40% and 60%. That translates into between 4.8% and 7.2% of GDP. The impact of new tariffs on our trade would be hugely damaging.

Around 45% of UK exports of goods and 54% of UK imports of goods would become newly subject to tariffs. While the simple average tariff is 5.1%, in some sectors this can be much higher: for dairy products—a key sector for my constituency—it is 39%; for preparations of meat and fish it is 40%; and for cars it is 10%. Tariffs would drive up prices for ordinary consumers. A Credit Suisse report last year said that food prices could rise by 8%, with UK dairy warning of a staggering 51% increase in the cost of Cheddar. Credit Suisse also said that car prices could rise 15% and predicted a 20% drop in sales as a consequence.

Non-tariff barriers would also have a significant impact on industries where the supply chain is deeply integrated across borders. A KPMG study for the Dutch Government cites a number of concerns. It estimates the costs of customs formalities to be between €78 and €126 per shipment. These costs would likely be passed on to consumers in addition to tariff costs. They also have concerns about the capacities of ports, both here and on the continent, stating:

“Even brief delays will probably lead to long queues at terminals in the Netherlands and the UK.”

This is not just a matter of physical capacity either, as we will need to ensure that our workforce develops customs expertise that has not previously been necessary. There are also questions about the capability and capacity of regulatory authorities. A National Audit Office report last year estimated:

“The number of decisions that have to be made over whether to permit people and goods to cross the border could increase significantly (potentially 230% and 360% respectively).”

I will make one final point about the border. There has been a recent push to suggest that an EU-UK hard border in Northern Ireland would not be an issue, as technology would solve every problem. These advocates cite the US-Canada border as an exemplar. I cannot agree. I refer colleagues to the evidence heard by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee in which Dan Mobley of Diageo said explicitly:

“It is not completely frictionless.”

If the Government are convinced that this is an approach that can work and meet the need for a frictionless border, I would press Ministers to publish detailed plans of how it would work. Overall it is easy to see why the Treasury estimates that the cost of a WTO-terms Brexit would be around 8% of GDP over the next 15 years. It is also easy to see why it is important that we assess the alternatives to this disastrous course of action.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does she share my concern about not only the potential of tariffs, but the fact that the WTO is unsatisfactory in many other ways? For example, it is simply non-existent or silent on swathes of industry, including the aviation sector. It is either WTO or nothing, but in the aviation sector, for example, there is not a default to WTO. That is the same in several other industry sectors and that is causing alarm and concern for business.

Antoinette Sandbach: I absolutely share my hon. Friend’s concerns. There are concerns in relation to intellectual property and the vast majority of our service industry,
which is a huge contributor to our balance of trade. He is quite right to outline the deep flaws that a WTO Brexit would bring.

The most preferable option in terms of a Government deal is the Government successfully completing their negotiation with the EU and securing the “deep and special partnership”. I support the Government’s work and the comments by the Brexit Secretary in his speech yesterday that we need to ensure a broad base of mutual recognition of standards. Without those, we would risk many of the drawbacks that we would face under a no-deal Brexit, especially with regard to the non-tariff barriers that are in fact the biggest concern for our economy. However, I press the Government to ensure that the service sectors are included in the deal that they strike. Services make up nearly 80% of our economy. Service industries such as legal services, insurance services, consultancy services, the music industry and the aviation industry contribute to our balance of payments surplus in service trade with the EU. A failure to strike a deal could cost us about 75,000 jobs and £10 billion in tax revenue.

Some hon. Members may think that simply remaining in the EU is an option. Rather than pressing for this currently unachievable choice, I would encourage hon. Members to see if we can deliver a Brexit that removes us from ever closer union and the political institutions of the EU, while seeking to maintain our prosperity and our trade links, which brings me on to my final option. This final option is the one that, aside from the Government’s plan, would be the best for Britain. Re-joining the European economic area/European Free Trade Association would be a bold step towards preserving our prosperity and provide many answers to the questions that are currently vexing Ministers.

EEA-EFTA would give us access to its free trade agreements spanning 27 countries. EFTA has free trade agreements with, among others, Turkey, Canada, Columbia, Mexico, Egypt and Israel. There are ongoing negotiations with India, Indonesia and Vietnam. These agreements, as well as EEA membership, would give a market of over 900 million customers for our products and services.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Is she proposing EFTA-EEA membership as a transition or a permanent safe harbour?

Antoinette Sandbach: I am proposing a permanent safe harbour. If we went into EEA-EFTA, we would have an opportunity to shape and influence that trade body going forward. It delivers what many of my constituents originally voted for in the 1970s, an economic free trade area, but its great benefit and advantage is that it removes us from the ever closer union, which is what many of my constituents who voted leave were concerned about.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con) rose—

Antoinette Sandbach: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), and then to my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson).

Heidi Allen: At the end of the day we have to try to find some peace on both sides of this argument. This could be the common market. It could, in some ways, be what many people who voted leave were hoping that we would go back to, and it could actually be the best compromise for everybody.

Antoinette Sandbach: I completely support and endorse my hon. Friend’s comments.

John Stevenson: My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) raised my question. In the referendum our country was divided between 52% and 48%. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) agree that the EFTA solution potentially unifies those two groups?

Antoinette Sandbach: I certainly do. It delivers what many people voted for, which was to leave the political institutions of the European Union while continuing our prosperity and building on our common links with the European Union. It would enable us to be in that common market that so many people originally voted for, with all the benefits that it entails for our businesses and constituents.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a powerful and compelling argument. Does she agree that we cannot ignore the fact that we are now 20 months down the road from the referendum? Whatever people might have voted for in the referendum, the reality of our current negotiating position will have to dictate the public’s acceptance of what we are eventually able to deliver. To simply live in the past as to what people’s views were in the middle of 2016 is to fly in the face of the reality of the evolving picture at a European level and what we can in practice achieve that is best for our country.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am grateful for my right hon. and learned Friend’s intervention. He calls to mind the comments of Bismarck, who said that “politics is the art of the possible.” It is my view that this is a possible and realistic achievement. It should be the Government’s plan B. We should be looking at this option as a realistic alternative. I cannot understand why, when we talk about a no-deal Brexit, we discuss only WTO rules and this eminently sensible, common-sense option, which would help to preserve economic prosperity in this country but deliver leaving the EU’s political institutions, is not treated with more seriousness by the Government.

My right hon. and learned Friend has rightly made the point that we are 20 months into the negotiations. We need to ensure that our plan B is credible and deliverable in a way that does not damage this country’s future, our shared values or the prosperity with the EU that has delivered for us over our 40 years of membership. The EFTA option gives us a huge opportunity not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, which nobody voted for.
Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, membership of EFTA-EEA connotes membership of the single market, which was rejected by the British people when they voted to leave the European Union. Is it her proposal that membership of EEA-EFTA also be put to the British people in a referendum?

Antoinette Sandbach: I am interested by my right hon. Friend’s comments. The quote that I referred to at the beginning of my speech—

“Britain will have access to the Single Market”—
came from the Vote Leave paper, “‘Leave’ looks like...”. So I would argue that the British public were promised that we would stay in the single market by Vote Leave.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I recall listening to the wonderful BBC’s “Today” programme on the eve of the referendum and the leading Brexiteer Daniel Hannan MEP describing the EEA as an economic free trade area that stretched from Iceland to Turkey, and how possible it would be for the UK to consider staying part of that even if Britain voted leave. Does my hon. Friend recall that type of message?

Antoinette Sandbach: I certainly do recall that type of message. It was one of the big messages that was being sent out: our prosperity would not be threatened, we would be able to stay in the single market and we would have the “exact same benefits” as before.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am intrigued because I thought the whole basis of my hon. Friend’s very fear-based analysis of Brexit is that the EU wants to stick tariffs on trade between the UK and the EU. Which leader around the European Union wants to stick tariffs on trade between the UK and the EU?

Antoinette Sandbach: I am interested by my right hon. Friend’s very fear-based analysis of Brexit is that the British public were promised that we would stay in the single market by Vote Leave.

Mr Jenkin: Not one!

Antoinette Sandbach: No. The consequences of a WTO Brexit mean that we fall back on rules that require the imposition of tariffs, unless we waive them as a most favoured nation status for all other countries. That would then expose our manufacturing, farming and other industries to competitors with far lower labour costs, when we have very high quality products in this country. That is the consequence of WTO terms.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. One of the common misconceptions is that the EEA and the single market are exactly the same thing. That is not the case. There is no common fisheries policy and no common agricultural policy. The writ of the European Court of Justice does not run to the full EEA; there is the EFTA arbitration court. Articles 112 and 113 of the EEA agreement allow for safeguard clauses suspending things such as free movement of labour. So it is important that in this debate we clarify that the European economic area and the single market are not synonymous.

Antoinette Sandbach: I entirely concur with the hon. Gentleman. My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) is in his place, and in a previous debate he eloquently outlined the benefits of and difference between EEA-EFTA membership and full membership of the European Union.

Mr Grieve: Does my hon. Friend agree that there seems to be a misconception about the nature of the European Union? Listening to the intervention made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), I picked up the idea that the EU is some sort of sovereign entity. But it is not; it is an international treaty organisation, and therefore to ask it to change its rules base to accommodate the kind of access that was wanted, but which comes without subscribing to the rules, will be impossible in practice.

Antoinette Sandbach: I fear that my right hon. and learned Friend may be right, but I am very happy to give the Government the benefit of the doubt in their negotiations and to seek to achieve the aims that they aspire to. However, I am outlining the consequences of a no-deal, and if the Government are unable to achieve their aims, EEA-EFTA membership should be the plan B, alternative option, which the Government need to give greater consideration to.

Heidi Allen: It seems to me that whatever side of the argument the public started on, what they want from Parliament more than anything is to find a way through this and to secure the best outcome. That involves compromise, which my hon. Friend’s suggestion of EFTA-EEA could be. On behalf of the country, as Parliament we should get behind the Prime Minister and offer that as a solution. No side gets absolutely what they want, but that is the nature of democracy. It is about compromise.

Antoinette Sandbach: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. My personal view is that I would much rather remain in the European Union. That is what I voted for and believe in, but in seeking to honour the result of the referendum, we need to look at this credible and deliverable option that removes us from ever-closer union. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex outlined in his debate two weeks ago, this option has significant advantages in terms of taking us out of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and delivering on many of the issues that concerned the UK public.

I was talking about the potential access to 900 million consumers for our products, which I would say is an optimistic, not a fear-based outlook. When compared to EU membership, EEA-EFTA membership is significantly cheaper. In 2015, Norway’s net contribution was £115 per person, compared to £214 per person from the UK.

An EEA-EFTA agreement would protect our services industry, as it would give us continued access to the common market. The impact on our GDP and trade would be barely a quarter of that of a WTO-terms departure, which would cause a drop in trade of between 40% and 60%. EEA-EFTA would substantially reduce that.

Some hon. Members insist that EFTA membership would not respect the referendum result, but I disagree. The referendum told us that we should leave, but not how. If we value prosperity above ideology, and pragmatism
above all, there is a clear case for an EEA-EFTA-style agreement. We would be free of the risk of ever-closer union; the organisation is clear that it is strictly an economic grouping. We would be rid of the prospect of ever having to join the euro. EEA-EFTA decisions require the agreement of all members rather than the votes of a qualified majority, so the risk to sovereignty would be reduced. Disputes would be resolved through the EFTA court, not the European Court of Justice. We would be free to set our own agriculture and fisheries policies.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) put my argument in its most succinct form: “if EFTA-EEA is such a bad idea, why are its four constituent countries among the richest and most successful on the face of the planet?”—[Official Report, 7 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 560WH.]

None of my proposals regarding EEA-EFTA are incompatible with the Government’s ambition. In the previous debate about EFTA, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) said that the Government seek “a partnership that in many ways goes beyond the EFTA arrangements we have discussed.”—[Official Report, 7 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 569WH.]

I would welcome such an end point and I am sure many colleagues would too. All we seek is the reassurance that if the Government fail in that laudable aim, we will fall back on an EEA-EFTA arrangement, rather than no arrangement at all.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. Before I call hon. Members to contribute, I note that there is a huge interest. Priority will be given to hon. Members who have already requested to speak in writing. The time limit will be four minutes, because I want to accommodate as many people as possible. I call Stephen Kinnock.

9.53 am

Stephen Kinnock: Clearly, the figures are a forecast, which is more of an art than a science, but the fact is that losing our largest market—where 43% of our exports go—will inevitably have a negative impact on growth. Whatever remedial measures businesses attempt to take, they will always be playing catch-up with the impact of that seismic event. It seems inevitable to me, therefore, that there will be a contraction in the economy.

At the end of last year, the head of HMRC told the Brexit Committee that preparing for Brexit is set to cost £1 billion over the next five years—and that is on the basis of our securing some kind of deal. That tells us that no deal is simply not an option, as the hon. Member for Eddisbury so eloquently set out. It also underscores the importance of the final part of the Brexit negotiations, in which the framework for the future relationship will be set out. If this House wishes to shape that, we must move quickly.

Today’s debate could not be more timely, because we are in a race against time. Later this month, the EU will publish the legal text of December’s joint progress report. In mid-March, the European Parliament plans to publish a resolution to be adopted ahead of the European Council meeting on the future relationship. That will be akin to the 3 October resolution, which made it clear that there would be no regulatory divergence across the Irish border, and that transition could “only happen on the basis of the existing European Union regulatory, budgetary, supervisory, judiciary and enforcement instruments and structures”.

That must sound familiar to hon. Members, and it means that we cannot dismiss it as just white noise. The October resolution was effectively the blueprint for the deals that have followed. That will also be the case for the resolution that will be passed in March about the negotiating guidelines for the future relationship.

When it comes to the future relationship, Michel Barnier has been clear: our options are a deal based on the Canada model or one based on the European economic area. Once that basic model has been agreed, there will be some scope during the transition period to add or subtract from it, but to all intents and purposes the choice will be made, and it will be binary—and it is coming very soon. That matters because the Canada model offers little on services, which make up 80% of the UK economy and almost 40% of our exports. As Mr Barnier has said, there is no place for services, because

“There is not a single trade agreement that is open to...services. It doesn’t exist.”

The Canada model also leaves us without a customs partnership, which is incompatible with the desire to have a frictionless border in Ireland.

Our conclusion must be clear: our preferred model—the only conceivable model, in fact—for the future relationship is one based on EEA-EFTA membership. EEA-EFTA offers the best possible terms of exit by providing the maximum possible access to the single market from outside the EU while allowing for differences that preserve our desire for greater control and self-determination. The EEA ends the principle of direct effect, so this House would have to pass all rules relating to the EEA internal market into law. It ends the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. Instead, we would move to

Kevin Hollinrake: Anybody—any hon. Member—can see those figures in the Treasury report, but the report caveats them by saying that that is without any other Government interventions or reaction of businesses in adjusting to a new world of trade with the European Union. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that?
the governance of the EFTA court, which frequently
forges a path different from that of the ECJ, and which
would have British judges on its bench if the UK were
an EEA-EFTA member.

In EEA-EFTA, we could shape the rules of the single
market, of which only 10% are relevant to the EEA.
With the right of reservation, we would possess a veto
over anything we considered inappropriate; that is not
being a vassal state; that is not an empty vessel. The
Norwegians have used their veto almost 20 times, most
recently in rejecting the third postal directive, for which
they suffered absolutely no repercussions.

Articles 112 and 113 of the EEA agreement allow for
suspension—

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. I call Paul
Masterton.

9.59 am

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a
pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.
A Brexit that put trade restrictions and tariffs between
us and the continent would be an unacceptable outcome;
that would make us an island off the coast of northern
Europe, rather than a truly global trading nation. That
is why we must support the Government in their aim to
achieve the best possible free trade deal with the EU.
However, a deal is by no means certain; we still have
plenty of hurdles to jump.

Even if we have heads of terms by October, it will be
some time before a formal, fully fledged deal is signed
and in place. That interim period will be ripe with
uncertainty, because a contract simply cannot be managed
and run on heads of terms, however well drafted. We
are now negotiating with 27 nations at once, with 27 different
opinions. Diverging interests among the EU28 have led
to frequent delays and dilution in previous EU trade
deals, or even their collapse, and the new deal with the
UK may be no exception. Although I have no doubt
that the UK can and will form new trading partnerships
across the world, I am not convinced that a full suite of
shiny new trade deals with key markets will be in place
and ready to go on day one.

For me, for my constituents and indeed for my children,
the alternative to a deep and special free trade agreement
cannot be no deal. Only seven countries trade on WTO-only
terms; most nations trade with the EU via trade facilitation,
customs co-operation and bilateral standards. Independent
WTO membership would require agreements on division
of EU import quotas from the EU27 and consensus, if
not unanimity, from the other 164 members. If we start
unilaterally reducing tariffs, “most favoured nation”
rules will also come into play.

Of course, WTO barely covers services. Some 24% of
people in the general insurance, life assurance and
pensions sector in the UK work in Scotland. Many of
them are in my constituency, East Renfrewshire, because of
its access to the burgeoning Glasgow financial district and
the central belt, and its easy links to London and the
continent. Having no deal would mean that banks,
insurance companies and fund managers could not
provide services across the UK from the EU. Contracts
that run over exit day, particularly for derivatives, could
simply become unenforceable. Business liability insurance
contracts often stretch decades ahead, so a no-deal
Brexit could result in insurers losing their licences in a
customer’s jurisdiction. Cross-border pension payments
between the UK and the EU simply could not be paid.

Numerous investment funds used by pension providers
are set up under Irish law or other EU-based jurisdictions;
in fact, more than 150 UK managers are managing Irish
funds right now. More than 2,000 Irish-domiciled funds
have been sold in the UK—more than €600 billion in
fund assets is managed by UK managers in Ireland on
behalf of UK investors. Collective investment schemes
are established and authorised under a harmonised EU
legal framework. Whatever route we choose, there will
be huge issues with authorisation, with passporting
under the alternative investment fund managers directive
and with maintaining the ability to distribute, say, Irish
funds into the UK post-Brexit, but under a no-deal
scenario those issues will be absolutely magnified.

Securing country-by-country authorisations for each
business line will be time-consuming and expensive,
which is why the Association of British Insurers said
very clearly last summer that a no-deal Brexit would be
“unacceptable”. The Pensions and Lifetime Savings
Association was even more blunt:
“WTO-only would cause major disruption. On no account
could the pension fund industry support a regime based only on
WTO rules. This would be likely to cause economic harm, create
regulatory barriers and undermine essential pensions support
services.”

The impact of a no-deal Brexit on the economy
would have significant issues for pension funds. Not
only would it lead to weaker investment return—it
might put defined-benefit schemes at additional risk by
weakening employer covenants, because sponsoring
employers in the sectors worst hit under a WTO scenario
would struggle to meet their deficit reduction payments.

I accept that Government contingency planning for
all scenarios must cover a no-deal Brexit, but it should
never advocate it as a preferred outcome. It must also
cover a range of other possibilities, including entering
EFTA with the EEA bolt-on, as I have said before. I will
not repeat the arguments I raised in our debate on
7 February. Instead, I will conclude by saying that I will
not allow my constituents to face the choice between a
deal on the table and a no-deal quagmire on the floor. If
a deal cannot be reached or is rejected, our plan B can
and must be EFTA-EEA. I urge the Minister not to
dismiss that out of hand.

10.3 am

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the
chance to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon.
Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on securing
it and on her forensically detailed devastation of the
prospects of a no-deal Brexit. Sadly, 62 of her colleagues
are not listening, but I hope that the Prime Minister and
her Cabinet are.

Yesterday, among other Brexit hyperboles, the
Environment Secretary announced that his colleagues
the Foreign Secretary and the Brexit Secretary were the
Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo of the UK
Government. I had never thought of Ronaldo before
when thinking about Brexit, although the word “messy”
has crossed my mind on a number of occasions over the
past couple of years. However, it strikes me that they
are two people who perform all over the world, but
always on opposing sides—never on the same team.
They also have a very clear vested interest in getting the Brits out of Europe as quickly as possible; with apologies to Chelsea fans, Messi did his wee bit for that last night. I assume that neither of the Cabinet Members in question can copy the tax evasion conviction that señor Messi acquired a few years ago, so perhaps the analogy breaks down there.

Peter Grant: I hope the hon. Gentleman is not about to contradict me on that point.

Crispin Blunt: No, although as a Chelsea fan I feel the pain of the hon. Gentleman’s Messi remark.

Since we are talking about the movement of people and services, what is the hon. Gentleman’s understanding of the implications of an EEA-EFTA arrangement—if that turns out to be the deal—for free movement of people post-Brexit and for the United Kingdom’s contributions to the European institutions?

Peter Grant: I am not actively promoting the EEA-EFTA option. Although it is significantly less bad than the no-deal option, it is still not good enough. For the record, I repeat that the position of the Scottish Government and the Scottish National party has always been that free movement of people is a good thing, not a bad thing that we have to accept in return for the benefits of free movement of goods, services and capital. It is a good thing for Scotland and—I believe—for the rest of the United Kingdom; I am disappointed that so many people in the rest of the United Kingdom do not accept that point of view. The contribution that EU foreign nationals have made to my constituency is far too important even to attempt to measure in purely financial terms.

The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) commented that this debate could not be more timely. That is certainly true, especially given the publication yesterday of a letter by the 62 out of 650 MPs who have taken it upon themselves to dictate to the Prime Minister what to do. It is interesting that the demands of 62 out of 650 have to be followed, but the expressed wish of 62 out of 100 people in Scotland in the EU referendum can simply be swept aside and ignored.

I commend the hon. Member for Eddisbury for reminding us that there is no democratic mandate for leaving the single market or the customs union. There is a mandate for two of the four nations in the UK to leave the European Union, but there is no mandate for leaving the single market.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I am sorry, but I really do not have much time and many other hon. Members wish to speak.

It is significant that the 2015 election, in which the Conservatives stood on a manifesto that said yes to the single market, was the only one in the last 25 years in which they secured an overall majority in Parliament. Two years later, they entered an election with a 20% lead in the opinion polls, published a manifesto to leave the single market and then lost their overall majority. That does not mean that single market membership was the only thing that mattered, but as an indication of a mandate from the public it certainly does not point to a hard no-deal Brexit.

We always talk about WTO terms as if they would solve all our trade problems. However, apart from the fact that international trade deals cannot be created overnight—the transition period gives the opportunity to complete them, either substantially or totally—it is against the treaties of the European Union to agree to allow the United Kingdom or any other member state to sign and implement trade deals unilaterally or bilaterally outside EU deals.

That part of the 62 Brexiteers’ demands simply will not be accepted by the European Union, and I think they know that; I think that demand is the wrecking amendment with which they are trying to wreck any deal whatever. WTO terms do not cover the single sky agreement: if we leave without a deal, the planes will stop flying. Nor do they cover Euratom: if we leave without a deal, the life-saving medical isotopes will stop coming across the channel in time to be of any use.

A lot has been said about Northern Ireland. I am frankly terrified by the number of hard Brexiteers who are prepared to sacrifice the peace process in Northern Ireland for their ideological obsession with a hard Brexit.

The alternative to no deal is, of course, a deal, and that is what the Prime Minister has set out to get. I was pleased to hear her support a deal that will mean free and frictionless trade in goods and services between the UK and the European Union.

That is a perfectly sensible position. Why would the European Union not want to adopt it? We have a trade deficit with the EU, particularly with Germany, of course, so it is sensible economics that the EU would give us a deal. That is a win-win situation, as Dr Stephen Covey said in his book, “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People”, which is a habit that I aspire to but will probably never achieve. Nevertheless, win-win is hugely important.

Stephen Covey also refers in his book to the “dialogue of the deaf”. That is when one negotiator is speaking one language—I am not talking about foreign languages—and the other negotiator is speaking a different language. The difficulty is that we are, quite rightly, talking sensible economics, yet the EU is talking politics. It is talking about the politics of survival of the EU. For us to leave with a good deal would almost undermine the very fabric of the EU, which calls into question the EU’s ability to agree a deal. Therefore, it is difficult to get the deal that the Prime Minister is setting out to achieve.
It is possible—politics is the art of the possible—but it will require compromise on all sides. That has to be the key to this negotiation.

None of us should accept being locked into the EU or holding us to ransom by threatening us, for its own reasons. That is not an emotional point; it is simply a point of the negotiations. We cannot be held to ransom in achieving and delivering on the objective that the British public gave us of leaving the EU.

That is the reason I did not support the “meaningful vote” amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. We have to accept at all cost the deal that the Prime Minister negotiates with Europe, and the EU needs to understand that. We will then give effect to the decision of the British people.

**Nigel Huddleston:** On the question of a meaningful vote, does my hon. Friend agree that we may as well at least discuss the EEA option? The political reality is that, at either the 2022 or the 2027 general election, one of the major political parties is highly likely to adopt it as a potential option, depending on how the scenario plays out in terms of the Brexit deal. Why not have that discussion now, because it is almost certainly going to come back to us in a future election?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. My point is that I will accept the deal that the Prime Minister negotiates. We will get a deal. I guess that it will not be the deal that we are all hoping for, but we will get a deal and I will accept it in Parliament. However, others may not and that is where plan B possibly comes in.

We should look at other options. Clearly, EFTA and the EEA have been discussed as an option and promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury as a return to the Common Market. There are difficulties, however, with regard to timescales and non-tariff barriers, which would still be an issue in terms of customs checks, border checks and sanitary and phytosanitary checks. The Northern Ireland situation has improved to some extent but it is still an issue, with the potential for a hard border. We are potentially rule-takers, of course, but there are fewer rules—we currently have to take 20% of the rules, according to the House of Commons Library. Free movement of people is a consideration, of course, although there are potentially some ways to control that, using articles 112 and 113. Another question is: is the proposal a transitional arrangement or a permanent state?

Ultimately, leave we must and therefore compromise we must, in order to deliver on and honour the decision made by the British public. I call on all sides in this debate—by which I mean Members of our party and of the Opposition—to look at all possible options, be willing to compromise over a deal that comes back, and consider where we will get to. Hopefully we will get the deal we want, but if we do not we have to consider a sensible plan B. I think that is what my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury was alluding to.

10.14 am

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on her speech. She spoke much sense, as she has done throughout this whole process, which neither of us ever wanted to be in. I share the hon. Lady’s dismay at waking up this morning to see that leaked letter by 62 of her colleagues—the hard Brexiteers—who have, in effect, written a ransom note. However, they are holding a gun not only to the head of an enfeebled Prime Minister but to the whole country’s head, given that the Government no longer have a majority.

What is at risk here? First, there is 20 years of peace in Northern Ireland, which is one of the proudest achievements of the last Labour Government, through the Good Friday agreement. Also, the Prime Minister made a speech last week about security arrangements; if we leave the European arrest warrant system, all the things that follow would make us less safe. And as has been mentioned by right hon. and hon. Members from both the Government and the Opposition today, leaving the customs union and the single market would make us less prosperous, because those two things are our passport to the world’s biggest single trading bloc. We would lose the unfettered access that we have enjoyed. I completely understand, appreciate and support the hon. Lady’s arguments for taking the EFTA-EEA route as a form of damage limitation if we are to leave the EU.

The motion states:

“That this House has considered alternatives to a no-deal outcome in negotiations with the EU.”

That is what we are being asked to do. To my mind, a no-deal option would be the worst possible outcome. The Minister has enjoyed a rapid rise. We are from the same intake and she is a nice person who I get on with, but I am curious to know this: if no deal appears to be a likely outcome, even if we are not making projections for it, will the Government reconsider altogether their position on the withdrawal of the article 50 application?

I am a London MP, so other Members will know more about issues such as fisheries. I want to talk about London. It is often said that the EU referendum result was the biggest electoral event that this country has gone through. The politician in this country with the biggest personal mandate ever is the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, and the independent research by Cambridge Econometrics that he commissioned has produced some quite scary figures. It projects that 87,000 jobs will be lost in London, with 27,000 of those in the creative industries alone. The research also mentions a “lost decade”, with £5 billion of lost investment by 2030 and GDP dropping by 3%.

For a London MP such as me, who knows about the economic powerhouse that is our financial services sector and in which many of my constituents are employed, a no-deal scenario seems unthinkable. We were promised a land flowing with milk and honey, with sunlit uplands ahead; now the best that we can hope for is not to have a Mad Max-style dystopia. The bar is being set rather low.

The complete lack of preparation is irresponsible. Yesterday’s debate on sanctions and anti-money laundering showed that even leavers want to transpose into our law what we already have, with the fifth anti-money laundering directive coming our way. Surely, therefore, if we must leave the EU, we must aim for the most prosperity-ensuring and pragmatic approach, and not a damaging and dogmatic exit, if we are to ensure that the road to Brexit is not—to use what I think is the Government’s own phrase—paved with broken glass.
10.18 am

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I had not intended to speak in this debate. The Prime Minister has set out her intention to have a smooth, orderly Brexit, delivering stability on security and maintaining trade. That is key for many jobs in the UK, but it is challenging to deliver.

In my constituency of Chelmsford, people voted 50:50—almost exactly—and I have always said that we need to try to find an outcome to the EU-UK negotiations that works for both sides, respecting those who voted to leave but also reassuring those who voted to remain.

Delivering that deep and special partnership is important for my constituents, many of whom work in the service sector. The insurance sector is the largest employer in the city and many of my constituents commute to work in the City of London, but we also have people involved in science, research, advanced manufacturing and other areas.

I was prompted to speak this morning after reading the letter signed by some of my colleagues last night, because instead of helping the Prime Minister it seeks to tie her hands. I genuinely believe that some of the people who put their names to that letter did not fully understand the potential consequences, particularly the limitations and restrictions that would be imposed on an implementation period, which would make it much more difficult to have a smooth bridge between where we are today and that deep and special partnership.

Let me be clear: no deal is not an attractive deal. Failing back on the WTO pushes up tariffs, which pushes up the costs for consumers for food and shopping, and it brings in checks at customs, and I am fearful especially for Northern Ireland and Ireland. WTO rules would bring delays for producers, and they do not cover key areas, such as aircraft.

The Canada deal is also not an attractive deal. When I talk to key sectors of the British economy about what they want from a new UK-EU relationship, they tell me that it is about much more than just eliminating tariffs. A year ago I wrote that, “for the creative sector, it is being able to continue to run cross border clinical trials” and, once a drug has passed, to sell it across Europe; “for the digital entrepreneurs, it is access to cross-border data flows; for the car manufacturers, it’s knowing that once a vehicle has been approved by the regulators here they can sell it across Europe, and high-value manufacturing companies, it’s knowing that once a vehicle has passed its safety…tests” in this country, they can sell it across Europe; “for the creative sector, market access includes being able to have a joint action to stop…infringements of copyright; for pharma companies, it is being able to continue to run cross border clinical trials” and, once a drug has passed, to sell it across Europe; “for scientists, it is being able to take part in collaborative research”.

Banks and financial services want to know that once a product has been approved by the regulators here they can sell it across Europe, and high-value manufacturing wants to be able to source parts “from all across Europe” and to sell and manufacture them easily. All of those are covered by our current trading relationship with the EU, but not by the Canada free trade agreement. We need to be able to put the pluses on CETA.

The Norway EEA-EFTA option is also not particularly attractive, because it would mean that we would need to have controls in many areas to keep a frictionless border. Having said that, I believe that Britain will want to continue to have high standards on many products. There will be very few areas where we would be likely to choose to diverge, because I do not see it being a race to the bottom in standards. That is not in our interest or that of consumers. The WTO is not attractive. CETA does not have enough pluses. The EEA is not perfect, but let us at least use it as a starting point. Fundamentally, any new trade deal is not in our hands alone. We need to agree it with all 27 other countries, and we need to give our negotiators space to talk.

10.22 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on bringing forward this hugely important debate. I want to go off at a slight tangent, Mr Sharma, but it will become apparent why as I do so. As usual, I want to use examples from my constituency and from history.

Members will have heard of the highland clearances, which depopulated vast chunks of the highlands, but the fact is that throughout the following years, the depopulation continued. The export of our youngest and best was the most dismal feature of the history of the highlands. Indeed, if we look at the populations of towns and villages in my constituency in the far north of Scotland, we see populations falling steadily during the 19th and 20th centuries. Indeed, my father said to me in the late 1960s, “Young man, when you are grown up, you will go south and you’ll work”, because that was what happened in the past.

Someone travelling to the west of my constituency today will see very large signs saying, “This stretch of road was built with the assistance of the Scottish Government and the European Union.” I cannot overemphasise how important that infrastructure investment was to my constituency and to remote parts of the highlands. Members may have heard of objective 1. It was a deliberate targeting by the Common Market or the EU—call it what you will—of the most deprived parts of Europe. Additional funds were put in. To that end, new harbours were built, town centres were completely revamped and we saw a completely new, positive approach. In the early to mid-1980s, the population decline in my constituency and neighbouring constituencies in the highlands had halted and reversed. That strikes me as being hugely important.

I will not only mention what was good about the EU, but it is against that candle that I will hold all proposals in all their complexity. What do they mean for my constituency? Where will the replacement investment come from, whether we have hard Brexit, soft Brexit, membership of one organisation or membership of another? I need to know what will happen. Let us put it this way: my constituents voted remain by a majority and they can see that change is probably upon us, but they want to know where we are going, who is taking us where, and why all these people signed that letter to the Prime Minister. It seems slightly dotty to my constituents.

As has been said, we need to find our way through this. For one will always be watching closely to see what things mean for my constituents. Without the EU, the tragic depopulation of the highlands would have continued. It is a fact on the record for history that the EU halted that and helped turn the situation around. That has made a huge difference to my constituents. It means
that young people are being brought up and educated where they come from, rather than being sent south. The final question my constituents ask is, “What are you saying down in Westminster? Can you get people in the south to understand where we are coming from? The EU was not always a bad thing—it has done us good.” I leave Members with that question. It is hugely pertinent to me, and I mean every word of it.

10.25 am

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on securing this important debate, and I thank her for bringing it forward. I am sure she will not mind me saying that we do not always see eye to eye on everything, but the thoughtful way she has gone about the contributions she has made in this and other debates is a credit to the House. I am grateful to her for that.

I am also grateful to her for bringing some facts into the debate. With some elements of her parliamentary party, those facts are so often sadly lacking.

The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) is not in his place at the moment, but he made a strong and good point that we should all reflect on. We are now 20 months—almost two years—from the EU referendum. If people outside this place think we are going round in circles, I have some sympathy for them, but those who voted leave and those who were central to the Vote Leave campaign bear a huge amount of responsibility for that. It was grossly irresponsible to go into an EU referendum that everyone knew could have gone either way without setting out a White Paper, a manifesto or any detail of what leaving the European Union could actually mean.

When there is a referendum, those of us who are elected have a responsibility that we are held to by those who have elected us. That lack of detail means that the mess we are in at the moment sits at the door of the Vote Leave campaign. I have some sympathy—they will not hear it often from this side of the House—for Ministers for the mess in which they have been left, but not that much given that senior members of the Vote Leave campaign are in senior positions in Government and have been since the day after the EU referendum. They need to bear some responsibility for the devastation and uncertainty we are facing.

As usual, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) made some pertinent points. It is worth reflecting on the devastation in every part of the United Kingdom. That is not just something that those of us who backed remain or who want to have a closer relationship with the European Union think; it is borne out by the Government’s own analysis and by the Scottish Government’s analysis. Incidentally, the Scottish Government had no problem with publishing their analysis. The Scottish Government and the UK Government’s analyses appear to be very similar, which is interesting. It was reflected by the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), who rightly highlighted some of the problems that his constituents face.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury was correct when she mentioned Northern Ireland. Some Members of Parliament have been utterly and grossly irresponsible in their talk about the Good Friday agreement. I give credit to the previous Labour Government, John Major’s Government and Members across the House for their work on that agreement. I give credit to the bravery and far-sightedness of politicians across the island of Ireland, but in particular in Northern Ireland. The agreement was endorsed by a referendum on both sides of the border. That gross irresponsibility is something that those seeking to unpick the Good Friday agreement should reflect upon, and reflect upon well.

One thing that we can learn from Northern Ireland is the need for compromise, however hard won. I back the compromise set out by the Scottish Government to remain a part of the single market. As somebody whose constituency and nation voted overwhelmingly to remain part of the European Union, I might not like that very much—I want to remain part of the European Union—but that is the nature of compromise. It is tough on everybody. I am not saying that this is the end point in compromise—that can never be the case—but what has been very striking is the Government’s lack of willingness to engage with different parties, with the exception of the Democratic Unionist party, perhaps. That again is an irresponsibility that two years on we should all reflect on.

Moving away from the Government for a moment, I appeal to colleagues on the Labour Front Bench. We might think we are looking at an internal Conservative party squabble at the moment, but it is not. I wish it was only an internal Tory party squabble. A fierce one it is—I do not deny that—but one that impacts on each of us and on every constituent. My appeal to the Labour party is this: the Government are on the ropes and there are people and reasonable voices we can reach out to. I appeal to the Labour party to look again at the customs union and the single market and perhaps listen to their Back Benchers.

Luke Graham: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that more people in Scotland voted leave than voted SNP at the general election? The issue is not a Conservative one. There are plenty of issues in the Labour party and in the SNP as well. We have to work across parties to try to get the best solutions to avoid what might be a WTO exit.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman is right; we have to work across parties. It is a great pity that the Government will not do that. They will not sit down with the other parties, apart from the DUP, which is a great pity. He talks about the number of people who voted SNP and voted leave. A lot more people voted SNP than voted Conservative, and many more people voted remain than ever voted Conservative.

I want to ask the Minister a few questions. What happens to issues such as REACH and Horizon 2020? The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) made an excellent point about immigration. Scotland, like other parts of the United Kingdom, is losing people. We need freedom of movement. My hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) made an extraordinarily powerful point about the need for freedom of movement and the benefit that EU nationals bring us, and also how young people and others from across the UK have benefited from freedom of movement. I am one of them. I benefited from freedom of movement and was able to come back.
What happens to seasonal workers? James Orr, who farms next door to my house, relies on seasonal workers to pick broccoli, which has to be picked by hand. What happens in universities? The excellence of the University of St Andrews relies on EU nationals. Finally, does the Minister think that the implementation period should be based on WTO principles?

10.33 am

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a delight to wind up for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Mr Sharma. I join other Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). A large majority in this House respects the outcome of the referendum, but wants to ensure that we leave the EU on terms that protect the economy and people’s jobs and livelihoods, as well as the rights and protections that we gained through 43 years of membership. It is a majority that recognises our future lies in a close and collaborative relationship with the European Union. The hon. Lady is very much part of that majority, and she has done us all a service by securing this debate and in the way she opened it.

There is a heavy responsibility on this Parliament, on all our shoulders. We face the most important choices in our lifetimes that will affect generations to come. That demands that we are honest and open in evaluating the decisions we face. That is why Labour has consistently pushed for the publication of impact assessments and economic analyses so that we have the information we need to inform our decisions. We need to avoid what the Prime Minister’s former deputy, the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), described on Monday as the “problem of politicians who won’t accept evidence.”

He was also right when he said:

“If analysis is being produced, then publish it. And frankly there will be a big political debate...Let’s have this argument in public, that’s what democracies do.”

The referendum was a clear decision, but it was a painfully close vote that we should implement in a way that unites the country, which involves the sort of compromise that many Members have talked about. Whether people voted remain or leave, they will not thank politicians who lead them into a Brexit on a false promise that服 from the European Research Group has framed the Government’s approach from

whether the UK would be the scrapping of EU food rules. And for what? For 0.2% growth anticipated by the Government. So open discussion of all the options is vital as we move forward.

I have been to the reading room and I should make it clear that I am complying with the confidentiality requirements, so I quote from information in the public arena. We should pay attention to the Government’s own analysis that EEA membership would see 2% lower growth than otherwise projected over 15 years. A comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU would result in 5% lower growth, and no deal would almost double that: an entire 8% lower growth.

No deal is, of course, the most damaging of all the options. The hon. Member for Eddisbury made that case extremely clearly and well. We should look at everything. The Labour party wants to keep a customs union and a new relationship with the single market on the table. We want to consider the EEA-EFTA model, as my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) argued when we last debated the issue.

Vicky Ford: Did the hon. Gentleman say he wants to keep membership of “a” customs union or “the” customs union on the table?

Paul Blomfield: I really love the pedantry of this. I was clear that we are talking about a customs union that serves the needs of the British economy and British manufacturing.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich argued previously, the EEA-EFTA model raises challenging issues and would need to be supplemented by customs arrangements, but it should not be lightly discounted, because there are features of the EEA-EFTA model that we would want to see as part of any final deal.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Blomfield: I was just about to mention the hon. Gentleman, so I am delighted to give way.

Kevin Hollinrake: I await with anticipation what the hon. Gentleman will say. When he said he would not lightly discount EFTA and the EEA, does that mean the official Opposition are not discounting it as an option?

Paul Blomfield: I think that is fairly clear: we want to keep options on the table, in an economy-first Brexit negotiation. I was going to say that the hon. Gentleman’s points about the political ideology of the EU27 were reflected, ironically, at the weekend in Munich by the Prime Minister, when she warned the European Union not to let “political doctrine and ideology” stand in the way of a good deal on security—the hon. Gentleman is nodding. She was right, but if that is good enough for security, why is it not good enough for the economy? Political doctrine and ideology from the European Research Group has framed the Government’s approach from
day one, ignoring not simply the 48%, but so many of the 52% who did not vote for an extreme and destructive Brexit.

We have now had two of the series of Cabinet speeches apparently defining the “road to Brexit”, and they highlight the depth of divisions. We had the Foreign Secretary’s damp squib, setting out his ambition for regulatory divergence, contradicted yesterday by the Brexit Secretary, who tried to reassure everybody that little would change. Tomorrow, of course, the Cabinet will try to resolve the differences.

At this moment, out of the shadows, comes the European Research Group again, with a letter echoing the one co-ordinated by the Minister when she was its chair, seeking to derail the Government’s policy on the transitional period, and with it to ensure that the country stumbles towards the extreme and destructive Brexit that the vast majority of people simply do not want. Perhaps the Minister will take the opportunity, having not yet replied to my letter of several weeks ago, to reject that approach, and make it clear that she supports Government policy on the transition.

There has been a lot of common ground in today’s debate. The Opposition hope, even at this late stage, that the Government can reach out to the common ground in Parliament and in the country, with a sensible approach to the negotiations that face us in the few short months that we have left, seeking a Brexit that puts the economy first and keeps all options on the table.

10.42 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes): Thank you, Mr Sharma, for your chairmanship of today’s very interesting, fascinating and useful debate. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for supporting this approach on the scenario where the UK leaves the EU without a deal. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury in the House: “We approach the negotiations anticipating success and a good deal for...the UK.”—[Official Report, 1 February 2018, Vol. 633, c. 957.]

However, let me be clear: although it is in the interests of both the UK and the EU to secure that good deal, we have a duty to plan for all outcomes, including one where no agreement is reached. The Government continue to prepare responsibly for a range of results from the negotiation, including the unlikely scenario in which no agreement can be reached. In reflection of those preparations, the Treasury has already given Departments nearly £700 million to prepare for Brexit, and is making an additional £3 billion of funding available over the next two years to ensure that we are prepared for every outcome.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): The Minister remarked that the Government are, quite rightly, looking at all potential outcomes. In the unlikely scenario that there is no deal, the Government must surely prepare for what would ameliorate the economic damage that has been shown by the Government’s economic impact studies. Would it not be sensible to make sure that we have preparations for other solutions as well, one of which could be EFTA-EEA?
Suella Fernandes: As I will come on to, the Government do not think that the EFTA-EEA option meets the objectives that my hon. Friend sets out, because it falls short of what we are seeking in our new arrangement with the EU on many fronts. I will elaborate on that in a few moments.

The first alternative to a no-deal scenario, and the Government’s preferred outcome, is a new settlement with the EU, as set out by the Prime Minister in her Lancaster House and Florence speeches. As she explained, we seek “a new framework that allows for a close economic partnership” between the two parties and that honours the instruction of the British people to take back control of our laws, borders and money.

As an existing member state, we share fundamental beliefs in fair competition, consumer rights and strong regulatory standards. Our position as the EU’s largest trading partner means that finding a meaningful deal along those lines is in both our interests. As my hon. Friend for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) pointed out, the current trade deficit between the UK and the EU means that tariff-free trade benefits not only UK businesses and citizens, but EU businesses and employees who benefit from cross-channel commerce.

Antoinette Sandbach: Will the Minister explain what the Government’s approach is towards the service sector and non-tariff barriers?

Suella Fernandes: As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, 80% of the UK economy is based on services, so it is important that we seek an agreement that will further enhance the possibility for our services to be exchanged, and for collaboration to continue. Reducing non-tariff barriers is, of course, a priority in any agreement that we seek with the EU, and is something I believe would be possible.

We will agree a comprehensive economic partnership, underpinned by high standards and a practical approach to regulation, that ensures continued trade and prosperity between the UK and the EU, based on mutual recognition. Again, the Secretary of State set that out in his speech yesterday. That partnership will aim for as frictionless as possible trade between the parties and will ensure access to each other’s markets, so that our consumers and businesses can benefit.

On security, the Prime Minister said last week that we are proposing a new partnership on future security, law enforcement and criminal justice co-operation—a strategic agreement treaty that will allow us to work together with the EU to promote our shared interests globally. That new partnership is ambitious and will not only reflect our history and the practical benefits of co-operation in tackling shared threats, but demonstrate the UK’s genuine commitment to maintaining a secure and prosperous Europe.

We are not pursuing EEA membership or aiming simply to copy the Canada-EU free trade agreement. The Norway option is not for the UK. We seek a collaboration on trade and security. We want to enable control over migration, autonomy over our laws and regulations, and the freedom to implement our own independent trade policy with the rest of the world. Only the deal that this Government are aiming for strikes that balance, which is why that is the best outcome for the UK and the EU.

As part of the deal between the EU and the UK, we are seeking a strictly time-limited implementation period.

Antoinette Sandbach: The Minister seeks to rule out a Norway option as not satisfactory. Will she also rule out a WTO option?

Suella Fernandes: We are not working towards a no-deal scenario, if that is what my hon. Friend is implying. As I have set out just now, we want an agreement based on tariff-free access, reducing our non-tariff barriers and with the ability to strike our own free trade agreements, but it is clear that we are a founding member of the WTO and plan to take up our seat at that organisation in due course.

Stephen Kinnock: The Minister has set out all the reasons why the Norway option does not work, but has also said that the UK wants collaboration on trade and security; access for services, which are a vital part of the economy; the ability to strike our own free trade agreements; and no ECJ jurisdiction. The Norway option ticks every one of those boxes.

Suella Fernandes: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. Because Norway, although part of the EEA and EFTA, does not have much say on rules and regulations that come to it through the EEA agreement.

Vicky Ford: Will the Minister give way?

Suella Fernandes: One last time—I am running out of time and need to finish my comments.

Vicky Ford: Norway does have a say on rules and regulations. It sits in various standard-making bodies, for example, and contributes to legislation. It does not have a full vote, but then we are leaving the single market so we will need to have a new relationship with that single market. It gives market access, which is, as you Minister has said, so attractive. Will she again consider that that may be worth investigating—perhaps not in its entirety, but elements could be of interest?

Suella Fernandes: Norway does not have a seat in the European Parliament. It does not have a vote on whether regulations coming through the EEA agreement apply to it or not. It generally has to follow those obligations in line with its obligations under the EEA agreement. To diverge from that agreement would be a breach and would therefore lead to questions about its membership and subscription to that agreement. That is a fundamental point that makes membership of the EEA and the Norway option not attractive for the UK.

In response to calls from business, the implementation period is there to benefit businesses and individuals, so that they avoid the need for two sets of changes. It will also give them more time to adjust to the new future partnership.

Paul Blomfield: Will the Minister give way?

Suella Fernandes: I will not, unfortunately. I have only six minutes and I have quite a lot to get through. I am sorry; I cannot.
The implementation period will also ensure that businesses have time to adapt to the new relationship between the UK and the EU. Crucially, only under a deal with the EU and the UK can this essential period take shape. None of the alternatives suggested in today’s debate can offer that level of continuity and clarity to businesses and citizens in the short term. That is why the deal that the Government are seeking is the best alternative to a no deal and is an alternative that we are confident of securing.

On EFTA——

Paul Blomfield: Will the Minister give way? There is a tradition of accepting an intervention from a shadow Minister.

Suella Fernandes: I must continue because I do not have much time, and EFTA has been a big issue in this debate. I will give way if I have time after my comments—I hope the hon. Gentleman will have patience with me.

Several hon. Members have raised EFTA membership today as the main alternative. Although we recognise the benefits of ensuring continuity in our relationships with the EFTA states, we have no plans to seek membership of the EFTA agreement for four key reasons.

First, EFTA is a trading bloc of four countries. Membership of EFTA does not in itself deliver any market access to the EU. Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein effectively participate in the EU single market by virtue of the EEA agreement. That would not deliver more direct control over decisions affecting the UK, nor would it deliver control over migration, which is a key aspect of our leaving the EU.

Switzerland participates in some areas of the single market through a series of bilateral agreements with the EU, but many of those do not cover the areas in which the UK has interests. In any case, the Government have made clear on a number of occasions that we are not pursuing an off-the-shelf arrangement; we are not copying and pasting other agreements. We are seeking a particular bespoke agreement relevant to the UK’s economy. The model I have been discussing does not strike the right balance on democratic control and mutual market access that we want in our future partnership with the EU.

Secondly, our ambition as a global trading nation goes beyond the scope of EFTA’s existing free trade agreements with third countries. EFTA’s FTAs are not suited to the size and type of the economy in Britain. They are not with the larger economies of the world—countries and economies with whom we would wish to be pursuing new economic partnerships. They are not in the sectors where our economy has strengths, which are areas in which we would want to pursue new agreements. Leaving the EU offers the opportunity to negotiate our own free trade agreements and to be a positive and powerful force for free trade in the world.

It is also worth mentioning that membership of EFTA would not be the quick and easy solution that some here have argued. Even if EFTA members were to welcome us back into EFTA, we would not have immediate or automatic access to their 27 FTAs. Our entry into each one would need to be negotiated individually with the third countries involved.

Thirdly, membership of EFTA means accepting free movement between EFTA member countries, as the EFTA convention provides for free movement of EFTA nationals. Liechtenstein has been raised as a derogation, but it is not a comparable example. Liechtenstein is a country with a population that numbers less than that in almost every constituency in the UK, at 37,000. It is very difficult to see how the example of Liechtenstein can be applied to the UK, with its population of 65 million.

Finally, although we want to maintain our deep and historic relationships with the EFTA states, the UK is in many ways different from those countries. The EFTA states have a combined population of 14 million people, compared with our population of 65 million. The EFTA bloc’s combined GDP in 2015 was around £710 billion, in comparison with the UK’s £1.9 trillion. The UK’s participation in EFTA would fundamentally change the nature of that group.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Minister, would you bring your remarks to a close?

Suella Fernandes: I note your comments, Mr Sharma. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury for raising this issue for debate today.

Antoinette Sandbach: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered alternatives to a no-deal outcome in negotiations with the EU.
Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of Coventry City Football Club.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Members for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) and for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) and my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) for attending this important debate. I also thank a Coventry City supporter exiled in Torbay—my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster)—and my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson).

It is clear from the number of MPs here today that there is significant strength of feeling in the Coventry and Warwickshire community and the wider area about the issues relating to Coventry City football club. Before I proceed, I must declare that I am a lifelong supporter of Coventry City football club. That is among my reasons for securing this debate, in addition to the fact that many of my constituents support the club.

My hon. Friend the Minister is no stranger to this issue. When she received notification for this debate, she will be forgiven for having thought, “Here we go again”—such is the importance of this issue. To set the scene for the Minister, the football club started as a factory team at the Coventry-based Singer bicycle factory in 1883. It has a proud 135-year history. It has played in every division of English professional football, and has a proud record of a continuous 34-year run in the top division of English professional football, and has a proud 135-year history. It has played in every division of English football. It is a FA cup winner, and it recently won the English Football League trophy.

Sadly, after a demise in the club’s fortune since its relegation from the premier league in 2001, it now occupies a place in the bottom tier of English league football. Despite that, 43,000 Sky Blues fans followed the club to Wembley when it won the FL trophy last year; just two weeks ago a reported 28,000 fans attended a match against Accrington Stanley at the Ricoh Arena; and last week 4,500 fans took the long trip to Brighton for the FA cup.

Football clubs are clearly businesses, but they would not exist, particularly if they do not get premier league television money, if it were not for the ordinary—I should say extraordinary—fans who make huge sacrifices to follow their team. Those people deserve a voice.

A lot has been said about the Coventry City saga. The hon. Member for Coventry South has secured several debates to discuss the dire state of the football club’s ownership and its tenure as custodian of Coventry City. A lot has been said about the legal disputes between the football club ownership, Coventry City Council and the Wasps rugby club, which now owns Coventry’s home ground, the Ricoh Arena, on a long lease.

I will not go over old ground or go into the rights and wrongs of where we are today. My intention is not to be political or to favour one organisation over another, but to focus on the football club’s future in the city of Coventry. This debate is the result of fan groups speaking to local MPs. Many of my comments and questions have been endorsed by seven supporters’ groups, which have also issued a unified statement.

At the point of securing this debate, the football club had until May this year before its agreement with the owners of the Ricoh Arena expired. In the intervening period, the owners of the stadium, the Wasps, granted the football club an extension of a further year, which is extremely welcome news. That said, ongoing legal matters between the football club owners and the Wasps mean that the long-term future of Coventry City’s ability to play at the Ricoh Arena is far from clear, which is worrying because there is no other obvious place for it to play within the city of Coventry.

Supporters’ groups are anxious about the future, and want to ensure there is no repeat of the situation in 2013, when Coventry City played its home fixtures more than 30 miles away in Northampton. I give way to my hon. Friend, who is on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and on his championing of local supporters’ groups. The supporters’ groups unity and their willingness to work together to come to a solution is in sharp contrast to the behaviour of many of the other parties involved. The loud message we must send today is that those parties must come together to sort out this situation for the benefit of the sport and the people of Coventry.

Mr Jones: I completely agree. That brings me to the four issues I want to raise: the current mediation process, at the direction of Court of Appeal judge Mr Justice Irwin; the role of the English Football League; the informal mediation process instigated by my hon. Friend the sports Minister; and future cases of crisis in the management of football clubs.

On the mediation process, Court of Appeal judge Mr Justice Irwin was quoted by the Coventry Telegraph on 28 November last year as saying:

“There is a long standing relationship between the parties, there needs to be working relationships in the future, it seems to me desirable that all parties go into mediation seeking to resolve all of those disputes relating to those relationships. That would include any future civil proceedings. It would be futile to enter mediation without considering that.”

By the end of the mediation process, if it is successful, all parties should be able to walk away with all issues resolved...This is a case crying out for an honest attempt at mediation.”

I could not agree more. All parties involved have an obligation to their own organisations, but they also have a significant moral responsibility to mediate in the spirit that Mr Justice Irwin advocated. They must realise that that famous club’s 135 years of history and its future are at stake, as is what the club means to the community and the economy of the city of Coventry and the surrounding areas. I wish the parties well, and I urge them all to heed that advice.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a typically thoughtful and passionate speech of great importance. As the co-chair of the all-party group for sport, I want to highlight just how important this issue is. Lessons need to be learned from...
what happened to Wimbledon. Nothing was resolved, and now that football club has been moved to Milton Keynes Dons and its history has been robbed.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is a great advocate for all sports, and he certainly knows his football. I thank him for his support.

We must not prejudge the formal mediation process, but if it fails to clarify where Coventry City will play its home games, I want the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee to ask the parties, including the English Football League, to attend a hearing of the Committee to explain how the issue of the football club’s future can be resolved.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate, which is of interest to many of my constituents, who are naturally Coventry City supporters. He is talking about the parties involved, one of which is Wasps rugby club, which acquired the stadium a while ago. Does he agree that it is incumbent on Wasps to do what it can, as it is doing, to provide a home for Coventry City to ensure that the football club can continue to play in the city that bears its name? Elsewhere in the world, two sports operate out of one venue. So far, Wasps has been sympathetic and has allowed a further year. Does he agree that it needs to be encouraged to continue its very generous offer?

Mr Jones: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. That is why I set out at the start of the debate that I would not favour any particular organisation or relive old battles, because a solution to the situation is needed.

Returning to the role of the English Football League, I would like the EFL to explain its earlier role in the club moving to Northampton and to explain to Coventry City supporters its view of the future. In my view, the EFL should not again allow the club to move outside the city of Coventry.

I echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull in his intervention by raising the issue of the start of an informal mediation process. The Minister has been very helpful in that, and I would be grateful if she will explain the work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) in that regard.

Finally on the approach of the EFL, we need to look at situations similar to that of Coventry’s—clubs like Blackpool and Charlton, which are recent notable examples. Coventry City supporter groups have felt that the EFL should in such circumstances be able to appoint someone independent to make recommendations to the league on how to proceed and on the parties.

I will conclude, because I am splitting the speaking time to allow two Coventry Members of Parliament the opportunity to speak in the debate. I appreciate entirely that the Minister will not have all the answers for us today, but I ask her to consider our points seriously and to work with the football authorities to ensure that we do all that we can to secure a future for Coventry City in the city of Coventry. Football and its authorities must send a message to owners of football clubs that where a club is embedded in a community we must ensure that it stays in that community. The issue is important not only for fans of Coventry City football club, but as a marker to be put down because we do not want other football clubs and other groups of supporters to be in this situation in the future.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) on securing the debate. As he rightly said, we have had many debates on the subject over the past six or seven years. I agree with near enough everything he has said, so I do not intend to cover that, but I have some other points to make. The first of which is to thank the sports Minister for her help. She appointed a mediator—for want of a better term—and the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) did a very difficult job to the best of his ability. I can find no fault in that.

Another interesting point is that, as I have been arguing for a long time, we should have as a mediator someone from outside football—possibly a judge, if need be—to adjudicate. It has to be someone of substance to take the heat out of the situation. I am glad to see that the Court has now finally come to that conclusion, rightly or wrongly.

I have one or two other observations. I have met successive sports Ministers over the years and I have had no doubt that they have a difficult job dealing with the football league. In my view, that is because of the absence of strong regulation of it. In the Bundesliga, for example, very few clubs have gone bankrupt or out of business. Perhaps we can learn a lesson from that—although others in the Chamber probably know more about the Bundesliga than I do.

I have had a number of discussions with the Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins). Incidentally, he came to one of our debates and he was very helpful, so in fairness I pay tribute to him for that.

Julian Knight: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Cunningham: I do not have very long, so I will give way very quickly to the hon. Gentleman.

Julian Knight: To reiterate the hon. Gentleman’s point, I am a member of that Select Committee—it’s second longest serving Conservative member—and in our discussions we have considered what has happened to Coventry to be a stain on football. It needs to be resolved.

Mr Cunningham: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. All of us, including different sports Ministers, have been trying to do that for the past six or seven years.

The Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has agreed to meet the interested MPs, as I am sure the hon. Member for Nuneaton knows. Subject to us getting a date—[Interruption.] I can see you signalling for me to finish, Mr Sharma, so I will emphasise the point that the club has to stay in Coventry. It has another 12 months at the Ricoh, so let us hope that in a shorter period we will resolve the problem.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.
I commend the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) on securing this timely debate. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), I would reiterate most of what has already been said today.

The ongoing saga at CCFC raises many pertinent questions. How should a football club be run? For whom should it be run? Who should be allowed to own a football club? How can responsible and transparent club ownership be ensured? When should the footballing authorities intervene in poorly run or failing clubs? Those are all extremely important questions that need to be answered. But the most pressing question of all for Sky Blues supporters—the one that would have had the greatest immediate impact on the club’s future—was: where would the team play their home games once the Ricoh Arena deal expired at the end of the season?

We now have confirmation that an agreement has been reached to extend the Ricoh deal by a year, until May 2019, which gives supporters certainty about where they will be watching their team play, at least in the short term. Any agreement that provides a degree of certainty for the supporters while ensuring that the club remains in its home city is, of course, most welcome. Ultimately, however, all the club’s owners have done is to kick the can down the road. The club still has neither a permanent home nor any tangible long-term stability, and it is likely once again to face the prospect of homelessness in 12 months’ time.

To my mind, there are two ways to avoid a repeat of the situation: the club’s owners sell up and leave; or they fundamentally change the way they do their business. The latter would require them to use the next 12 months to repair the relationships that they have systematically dismantled over the past decade; to make a commitment to the club and its traditions; to provide decent investment on and off the pitch; to engage in frank and open communication with the fans; and to acquire a social conscience by considering the impacts of their actions on supporters and the wider local community in Coventry.

Either way, we need to see a step change in the way the club is run in order to ensure greater long-term stability and an improvement in the club’s fortunes on and off the pitch. I, too, know that the Minister has been following the situation for some time, and I look forward to some answers from her today.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): As always, Mr Sharma, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) for securing the debate and for the passionate and insightful contributions he and others have made—although I shall breeze over any reference to Coventry’s FA cup success. That aside, I sympathise with the points made by colleagues. They have re-emphasised the case that football clubs up and down the country remain of great importance to their local communities. Coventry City is no exception. Without question, every care should be taken by club owners and stakeholders to respect their club’s history, and they should seek to preserve their club’s long-term status.

The issue surrounding the Ricoh Arena and where Coventry City plays its home games is familiar to us all—in fact, it seems like only yesterday that I was stood in this very place responding to the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) on this very subject. It was in October 2016; Members present might recall that I urged the various parties with a vested interest in Coventry’s future to come together and to provide that much-needed stability to the club and its loyal supporters. Since then, it has been a rather anxious wait to hear what progress has been made.

I want to take a moment to say how extremely grateful I am for the efforts made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) for securing the debate and to acquire a social conscience by considering the impacts of their actions on supporters and the wider local community in Coventry.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton pointed out, the clock was ticking for the club to come up with a solution. I can only imagine how those associated with the club—the players, the staff and the fans—were feeling given the uncertainty hanging over them. It came as some relief when, earlier this month, news emerged that a new one-year agreement had been concluded with Wasps Group for the club to continue to play its home games at the Ricoh Arena until May 2019, providing immediate stability for everyone at the club. However, I recognise what the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) said—that is a short-term solution and we need to find a long-term one.

Although I recognise that those longer-term plans were not outlined, the deal demonstrates that there is a mutual interest in the two clubs working together, which will hopefully stretch much further into the future, for the good of the city of Coventry. At the same time, I want to be clear that future arrangements at the Ricoh Arena between Wasps and Coventry City remain a commercial negotiation between private parties. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton and the hon. Members for Coventry South and for Coventry North East will fully understand that it is not a matter in which the Government can—or should, in my opinion—intervene. That said, I am always willing to try to help facilitate. I care passionately about the future of football clubs and their importance in local communities and I am willing to support and help where I can, although the actual intervention is slightly beyond the remit of a Minister.

Mr Cunningham: Will the Minister urge the Football League to meet Members of Parliament for Coventry and Warwickshire to discuss this issue? The League seems elusive when it comes to trying to get meetings with it.

Tracey Crouch: I do not need to ask the EFL to meet Members from Coventry and those who have an interest in the future of Coventry City football club, but I am willing to try to facilitate that meeting if Members are finding it difficult to do so. Yes is the direct answer to that question; that invitation should be extended not just to Members for Coventry, but Coventry City supporters and those in the wider Warwickshire area who have a vested interest in the future of the club.
The ongoing dispute between the owners of the football club and Coventry City Council is rightfully a matter for the courts. Given the protracted history between the parties, the Court of Appeal has taken the sensible decision to begin a period of mediation. I hope that it will result in all parties resolving their issues once and for all. It is sometimes easy to forget that the majority of football fans in this country follow clubs outside the premier league, and that those clubs operate on a completely different financial scale.

The reality for clubs such as City is that they cannot rely on huge sums of money from broadcasters or sponsors; they must rely on private investment from owners and the support of local businesses. They need the watchful eye of the English Football League to ensure that owners abide by the rules and that clubs are living within their financial means. Clubs need the help of their local councils for the use of stadiums, and of course they need the fans as a regular source of income and ongoing appeal.

Football clubs need to be run as businesses, but if a company cannot guarantee a product, its customers go elsewhere. Clubs are not like that. They are built on fan loyalty passed through families and generations; they are wedded to their local communities and they have a social heartbeat.

**Mark Pawsey**: What is exceptional about the Coventry situation is how there has been a falling out between the club and its supporters. Coventry is a big city, with 300,000 residents. A lot of people are excited by football, but the football club under its current ownership does not seem to have motivated those people. They are more motivated to support the club when it plays away than when it plays at home. That is the bit that needs to be worked on.

**Tracey Crouch**: A bit later in my speech I will come to the importance and the value of fans. The fan base across the whole of English football is growing. In fact, attendance at the English game is the highest it has been for a very long time. Fans have not lost that local connection. All-important revenues are coming into clubs and helping to keep them financially viable. Ensuring long-term financial sustainability must remain the primary responsibility of all club owners. They are the custodians of that club and wherever possible they should aim to leave the club in a better state than how they found it. That is relevant not just to Coventry City but to a whole host of clubs across English football.

Working with clubs, the football authorities must continue to set the parameters for financial sustainability. Through the owners' and directors' test, the EFL—and, indeed, the premier league—must keep under review the framework governing the conduct of club owners and directors, engaging with supporter groups in the process. Where there are breaches of the ODT, they take action, and I would expect them to continue do so.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) just pointed out, supporters have a crucial role in the fortunes of their football club, and club owners must remember that. From time to time, there may be a breakdown in the relationship for a variety of reasons, but if or when that happens, it is imperative that club owners engage openly with fans. Through the work of the Government expert working group on football supporter ownership and engagement, rules are in place that require open dialogue between senior club executives or owners and fans on the most important issues for the club. These rules are not prescriptive, but they will usually include its financial standing, the identity of its owners and future plans. In the case of Coventry, without question that should include plans for where the club plays its football.

Last December, I reported on the progress being made by the vast majority of clubs to engage with fans, but I am well aware that this needs to be a continuous process. My hope and expectation is that the relationship will grow over time as trust builds; clubs feel more at ease sharing information and fans realise the many facets involved in running a club. As this progresses, as I believe it will, fans will become much more involved in the running of their clubs, and that can only be a good thing.

In conclusion, it is my belief that the Government should not involve themselves in the commercial or legal affairs of any individual club, including Coventry City. The responsibility for ensuring the future of a football club sits with the incumbent owner. As outlined, the football authorities have a role to play, too, and I encourage them to work with supporters as well as owners to ensure their ownership rules remain robust. It goes without saying that those with a direct say or influence over the club’s future must continue to work together to provide the clarity needed.

In the case of Coventry City and the city of Coventry, I remain hopeful that through the mediation process the long-running disputes off the pitch can be resolved quickly, so that this proud club with a wide and varied fan base can concentrate solely on matters on the pitch. I wish them the best for the rest of the season.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

*Sitting suspended.*
Carillion: TUPE

[SIOBHAIN MCDONAGH in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the application of TUPE to Carillion workers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank the House for finding the time for this important debate, which I am pleased to have secured. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about the application of TUPE to Carillion workers, which is a necessity due to Carillion’s collapse. I do not intend to speak for long, because I want to allow all Members to express their views about this important issue and to leave the Minister sufficient time to respond to the many questions and concerns that I know Members on both sides of the House have about how the Government claim they are dealing with this important and complex issue.

We are all aware of the history of Carillion plc’s £1.3 billion deficit and the irresponsibility of its directors. I remind Members of the redundancy of tens of thousands of workers who were employed directly by Carillion or indirectly by contractors.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does she agree that it is important that we ensure that Carillion apprentices are appropriately looked after? Although about 400 of the 1,400 have been found alternative placements, we must find alternatives for them all.

Eleanor Smith: My hon. Friend is correct: this is about apprentices as well as all the other Carillion workers.

Vital contracts for delivering urgent public services are under threat. Their maintenance is an essential part of the way this country is managed under privatisation. Many long-awaited building projects, such as the Midland Metropolitan Hospital in Smethwick, are under threat and may never restart. Above all, however, I want to focus on the crucial issue of what specific assistance the Government will give to the tens of thousands of workers who have been made redundant and to the contractors whose contracts are now in doubt.

In January, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) and I met the Minister. At that meeting, I put to him four questions, which I ask him again today. First, will he bring Carillion public sector contracts back in house? If so, when and how? Secondly, what protections will he put in place for employees’ pensions, and will the Government meet union pension officers to address the many issues arising from liquidation? Thirdly, what guarantees can he give employees who were directly affected by the collapse of Carillion, and what programmes will the Government put in place to assist all those who have lost their jobs in this crisis? Fourthly, in view of the national significance of Carillion plc, will the Government set up a taskforce to deal with its collapse and all the associated fallout, and will that body include union involvement?

In response, the Minister told me that a lot of work had been done to prepare for Carillion’s liquidation. I have to say that it does not look like it. He told me that all public sector contracts would receive a smooth transition. What assurances can he give me that that will happen? He told me that the plan was to transfer the contract for the Midland Metropolitan Hospital to another company. What is the latest on that urgent matter? The Government have promised to set up a taskforce comprising the unions, business organisations and construction companies. What steps are being taken to protect transferred workers?

I refer the Minister to the letter from Frances O’Grady of the TUC on 30 January requesting protection of transferred workers’ terms and conditions. As the letter states, the transfer of workers employed on Carillion contracts in both the public sector and the private sector creates a significant risk of detrimental impacts on the pay, pensions and terms and conditions of all those staff. The letter calls on the Government to protect the livelihoods of Carillion workers and to ensure that they suffer no detriment from finding themselves employed by alternative providers of services.

The Government should, as a priority, look at ways of compelling public bodies to protect the terms and conditions of workers transferring to alternative providers. For example, the Cabinet Office should adopt a statement of practice on staff transfers that applies to all public bodies, including central Government and local government, the NHS, Transport for London and Network Rail. In that spirit, staff involved should be treated no less favourably than if the TUPE regulations had applied, and appropriate arrangements should be made to protect the occupational pensions and the redundancy and severance terms of staff in all types of transfer.

I call for voluntary TUPE agreements with new employers and for workers to be treated contractually as if they have continuous service. Will that be done? Will the Minister confirm that the Government’s objective is to ensure that Carillion workers’ rights remain the same, without any detriment?

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Does not the sorry story of Carillion’s collapse illustrate exactly why there should be proper oversight of public sector contracts that are put out to private companies? We have seen problems in the Ministry of Justice with G4S and in the Home Office with Clearsprings. We should set the standard for employment terms and conditions through procurement. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a real opportunity to do that?

Eleanor Smith: I agree. I have finished my speech. I would now like to give my colleagues a chance to speak and to hear the answers to my questions.

2.38 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate. I intend to be brief. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on securing this important debate. As a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which is conducting an inquiry into the collapse of Carillion, I assure her and other Members present that a thorough investigation is ongoing. I am sure that Members are aware of the proceedings of that Committee.
As has been said, Carillion’s collapse was a complete commercial disaster, and one that could have been prevented with proper corporate governance. It is right that we focus our attention on the people most directly affected by the failure of Carillion—namely, the employees. It is not their fault that there was a failure of leadership and culture at the top of that business. They are made to suffer the consequences of a situation not of their making.

I recognise that this debate is not about the business model—we could talk about that endlessly—or the business strategy, how the business was run in terms of the standards adopted, or the culture of the business. In other circumstances we would review all of those carefully, to learn what must be learned from such a catastrophe. The decision making of the most senior executives has been mentioned. Having spent 30 years of my life in business before coming to this House, I can honestly say that I have never met such a sorry bunch of directors as the Carillion directors we had before us.

The decision making of the most senior executives has been mentioned. Having spent 30 years of my life in business before coming to this House, I can honestly say that I have never met such a sorry bunch of directors as the Carillion directors we had before us.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman and I are on the joint inquiry into Carillion. Will he say something about how the pension scheme was managed? Does he agree that dividend payments appeared to be a higher priority than funding the pension scheme for Carillion workers?

Stephen Kerr: Although that is not directly relevant to the debate, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. When we look at the facts, we see that there is no doubt that when the board faced choices about how to use money that, frankly, it did not have, it chose to pay dividends rather than to make payments into the pension fund. Those things need to be scrutinised, and lessons must be learned.

This debate is about the employees: decent, hard-working men and women—and their families—who brought their skills and work and did their very best for a company that many felt great fealty to and enjoyed working for. I know that, because just a few days ago a constituent approached me in the street and, in introducing himself, told me that he was a Carillion employee—in fact, he had been a manager. He spoke highly of the people he worked with and of the business he had spent some time at, which, as I have said, he felt some loyalty to. Graciously, he wanted me, as a member of the Select Committee looking into the failure of Carillion, to know that he and his colleagues—former Carillion employees—appreciated the thorough manner in which the Committee was conducting its inquiry. He said, “I know it won’t change anything, but it is right that the directors should be openly held to account. It’s about getting some form of justice, really, isn’t it?” That is what has brought me to my feet today. I needed to come to the debate to stand up and ask the Minister for some form of justice for the Carillion workers.

I congratulate the Government on the actions they have taken on the failure of Carillion, because they have managed to deal with the failure of the business. They could have been tempted to bail out the failing company by putting large sums of public money into it, but thankfully they resisted that temptation. They could have stood back and done nothing at all, but that would have been an abrogation of responsibility. In fact, the Government acted pragmatically, given the circumstances.

Jo Stevens: The hon. Gentleman mentions the Government taking responsibility and not standing back and doing nothing. Does he agree that, given the company’s three profit warnings, the Government should have done something before the collapse?

Stephen Kerr: Many issues relating to those profit warnings and the circumstances leading up to them need to be thoroughly investigated. Yes, at some point all of the stakeholders involved in this rather sorry story will have to explain and account for their decisions. That is right and proper and the way in which we run things in this country. We will learn from what we discover as we go through the process of inquiry. However, I congratulate the Government on acting pragmatically.

I now ask the Minister to act pragmatically on behalf of those workers who have moved from employment with Carillion to employment with a new private employer. We all know of the limitations of the regulations as things stand: TUPE applies only when a worker is transferred to a new company from an existing functioning company; it does not apply in the event of bankruptcy proceedings or analogous insolvency proceedings. I therefore ask the Minister to consider steps to provide, as my constituent said, some form of justice to Carillion workers who are transferred—thankfully, at one level—to another private company. Surely something can be done to protect the pay and conditions of those workers, because that is what would have happened had the contract changed hands: they would have been TUPE-ed across, as the saying goes. Instead, they have been caught up in the failure of Carillion.

It is wrong that these workers, through no fault of their own, should pay the price of lower pay and lesser conditions for doing the same job for a new company as they did for Carillion. When the Minister replies, I very much hope to hear that the Government will insist, at least in the transfer of public sector contracts from Carillion to new private companies, on a transfer of undertakings for the workers affected.

2.46 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Ms McDonagh, it is traditional at the start of these debates to say what a pleasure it is to serve under the Chair, and today it is really true. I begin by congratulating my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith), on securing the debate and by thanking the Minister for his close engagement in this issue in recent weeks, since the company went into liquidation.

As the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) just said, many aspects of Carillion’s collapse are the subject of the inquiries by the Work and Pensions Committee and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, including how the company got itself into such financial trouble, why so many big contracts went wrong at the same time and why the company kept paying out dividends while the pension deficit built up, among many other questions. Today, we focus on one in particular: Carillion and its staff.

At the time of Carillion’s collapse, the company employed roughly 20,000 people in the United Kingdom and a similar number abroad, with 450 employed in its Wolverhampton headquarters. Since then, more than 1,000 of those workers have lost their jobs. Many of them would have had access...
to the various voluntary redundancy schemes that the company put forward in the 18 months or so running up to its collapse. That raises a moral dilemma. Workers who had 20 or 30 years of service would have got quite generous voluntary redundancy payments had they pursued that option in the run-up to the company’s collapse. Therefore, the first question is: what was the gap in knowledge between the workers who were simply doing their jobs—perhaps thinking that there might be another couple of rounds of voluntary redundancy, so there was no urgency—and those at the top of the company, desperate to keep the company afloat? What did those at the top know about the prospects for the company’s collapse, compared with the workers, who perhaps did not? That gap in knowledge could result in a loss of tens of thousands of pounds—the difference between what someone would have got under voluntary redundancy and the bare statutory minimum they are now entitled to if they lose their job.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a really important point. A constituent of mine came to see me about the lack of information from Carillion and, frankly, the downright lies they have been told by their management and leadership. They were told that they would be made redundant on 31 January, and the goalposts have been moved time and again.

Now, staff in Sheffield are being made redundant on a rolling basis—they do not know when it will happen. Staff who have been there for 20 or 30 years, as my right hon. Friend said, run the risk of losing out on significant redundancy payments or are choosing to leave the company and find extra work. I hope the Minister will respond on information and transparency in the company.

Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The first thing I will raise is the question of redundancy and the payments available to those 1,000 or so people who have lost their jobs, but the second issue is about the workers who are left.

Carillion was, of course, a complex web of contracts, covering sectors as diverse as the Ministry of Defence, construction, prisons, school maintenance, cleaning and a whole number of other things. The official receiver is now going through those contracts and looking for alternative suppliers to take them over. The central question before us in this debate is on what terms those will be taken over, and what the pay levels and conditions will be for the workers who find themselves transferred.

Stephen Kerr: The right hon. Gentleman is making a valid point about the terms and conditions. I wonder whether he was as concerned as I was to read the reports about Serco picking up the contracts at, I think, about 50 NHS sites somewhere in England—I cannot remember exactly where—and the chief executive saying that it had saved £20 million on the contract. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with my concern: that that £20 million might be coming from the terms and conditions and the wages of the workforce?

Mr McFadden: I quite agree; that is a concern. Of course, the context is that a company went into financial collapse while running those public sector contracts, so it hardly looks as though it was making a big killing out of them—frankly, if it was, it would not have gone bust. The margins were already thin, and the public sector has proven itself over the years to be more adept at driving narrow margins. My concern is that somebody who takes over will drive that down further in precisely the way that the hon. Gentleman said and that the people who will pay the price will be workers, some of whom are on quite low pay to begin with.

The legal position is that TUPE does not normally apply in an insolvency; I think hon. Members here understand that. But the point being made in this case is that such a complex web of contracts is involved and there is such a significant public interest: if there is a proliferation of new suppliers, there is a strong case that TUPE should apply, at least where employment is rolled over.

Given Carillion’s collapse into liquidation, it is hard to say that it was earning very heavy margins on the contracts in the first place. The Minister for the Cabinet Office seemed to agree with that point when he told the House, shortly after the company’s collapse, that the official receiver was “looking at...whether it can offer arrangements whereby workers are no worse off than they were under the terms of their Carillion employment.”—[Official Report, 24 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 347.]

I agree with what the Minister for the Cabinet Office said on that occasion. That is the point I stress today.

I think we all understand that, sadly, in a case of insolvency there may be some job losses; part of the reason why, legally speaking, TUPE does not apply in situations of an insolvency is that there will be job losses. The question to the Minister is a slightly different one. Even if we understand that there are job losses, can the Government and the official receiver not insist that, when we are talking about not job losses but employment being rolled over from Carillion to an alternative supplier, on this occasion, given the public interest, the existing terms and conditions should apply as though under TUPE? That would be reasonable, fair to those workers and fair in terms of the public interest. On this occasion, it is the right thing to do.

2.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate; it is one that I have a particular interest in because of my own constituency and the workers there and across Northern Ireland. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on bringing the debate forward, presenting the case, and giving us an opportunity to participate. I thank her for that. It is nice to see the Minister in his place. I spoke to him beforehand. We are looking for substantive responses from him; we are not putting any pressure on him, but we are here to highlight the issues. He knows what the issues are and he knows what we are seeking.

Carillion is undoubtedly one of the biggest shakes in the construction industry in recent years, and yet as one delves deeper one can see that it was not a shock to those in the know but an inevitability. The hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) said in her intervention that there were two or three warnings along the way. I cannot quite understand why nothing happened. What we are seeking, in as gentle a fashion as possible but with firm determination, is to ensure that those warning
signs that were clearly there among some businesses are warning signs that the Government are able to take notice of and do something about.

When we hear about other big businesses—hon. Members will forgive me this, because we are probably all the same; I do not think I am any different from anybody else—and hear the names, we say, “Are they okay? What's their pension fund like?” Those are the questions we ask automatically, right away. If the pension fund is run down, that should be a warning sign of what is happening. I am not sure what powers the Government have on this, but I would be keen to ensure that they have the power necessary to check pension funds and see whether they are being run down.

When I ran my own business, I quickly learned that a business cannot survive with outstanding invoices. A 30-day pay period was my ultimate rule, and for good reason: if the retailer went bust, I would have a loss of £1,000 for one month, perhaps, but if it went for three months it would be £3,000. When the latest dictat from Carillion advised that 120 days could be an invoice period, something major was wrong.

Although we could and should go into a major investigation into how it all could have happened and how Carillion continued to be a warded Government contracts, that is not my most pressing concern. My most pressing concern, and the subject of this debate, is the workers—those with redundancy or uncertainty looming, a mortgage to pay, a family and children to look after and debts creeping up around them. How will the small businesses survive? My hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan), who is not here today but in a sitting of a Committee he is involved with, has a company in his constituency that finds itself in exactly that problem, with very deep troubles.

Carillion, as we know, employed some 43,000 staff worldwide and provided services for schools, prisons and hospitals, which have been well illustrated—we all know what they are—across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Reports suggest that Carillion had over 200 jobs in Northern Ireland, but sometimes we need to look at what that means, because 200 jobs does not mean 200 employees. That is 200 jobs with contractors, with subcontractors and with suppliers. There is a domino effect on many other companies. They are all hanging in the balance, and that is not a balancing act that any of us would want to sit back and watch.

There were many contracts, including repair and heating services for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and for Power NI. Boy, do I know that there was a period in which the Housing Executive in my constituency and across Northern Ireland was struggling under the burden of uncertainty! Constituents were ringing up to ask, “What is happening?” There is no doubt in my mind that the answer should be yes. I, along with other MPs and elected representatives across Northern Ireland, raised those concerns and we were fortunate to be given the assurance that ENGIE, the preferred bidder, identified by PwC's special managers as a specialist in the field. It was appointed following Carillion’s liquidation.

There is good news there again: the existing terms and conditions of the legacy Carillion contracts, including costs and service delivery, will remain. I noticed in the media that ENGIE confirmed that all staff working on the Housing Executive contracts would keep their jobs on the same pay and conditions.

We have had some good fortune in Northern Ireland, and we are pleased to report that in this debate. That is wonderful for Northern Ireland, but is it happening UK-wide? Perhaps some contributions will indicate that it is not. If it is not, it needs to be. It is time to address this. It must happen UK-wide, and if it does not, we in the House must take the lead. We look to the Minister to give us that reassurance, and I think all Members participating in the debate seek that assurance as well.

It seems to me that in a similar scenario, when the bankers messed up and small businesses paid the price, we did not do the best job in holding those bankers to account. Ensuring that TUPE happens for all existing contracts and contractors will ensure that we step up in the right way for those who are blameless and yet will carry the burden. I always say this—I am sure we are all the same—but my job here is to speak out for the wee man and the wee woman: those who are down there with big business trampling on the backs of their heels and the backs of their necks. That is what we do in the House: we speak out for those people and make sure we can be a voice for them.

There is waiving of fees and extensions of overdrafts, but how long will the banks continue with that without the guidance of this place? Has the Minister had any discussions with the banks on how they can assist and help small businesses? This is a national concern and must be addressed in this place, to stop the little man from drowning in the wake of the cruise liners that have continued to sail on through the storm that they created. We need Government intervention and Government help, and it is important that we receive that assurance today.

Enough is enough. I, for one, have no issue in supporting this motion and the thrust of why we are here today, which is to try to help those who are concerned about their wages, contracts, pensions and all the other things. They are concerned about putting food on the table and looking after their families. The contractors—the men and women who have outlaid money for materials and who have staff to pay and mortgages to pay—are the innocent. They have done no wrong but have been grossly wronged.

We are elected to this place to speak out for what is right and to ensure that we do what is right. At the same time, we ask the Government to ensure that right is done as well. We are called to bring in legislation that benefits our constituents and society as a whole, and that is what this debate represents. When we bring it up in Northern Ireland we have confirmed that that is the case, it must also be the case across the whole of the rest of the United Kingdom—in England, Scotland and Wales.
3.2 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on securing this extremely important debate. She clearly has a significant constituency interest in the matter, but as we have heard, such is the reach of Carillion that no part of the country is unaffected by its demise.

I will not repeat the stories of greed, arrogance and, probably, negligence that have led us to where we are today, except to say that it is a bitter irony that many of those culpable for the current state of affairs are the least affected by it. We know the company ramped up dividends, borrowed more and more money to effectively hand it over to shareholders, delayed payments to creditors and generally behaved as if there was no tomorrow, with no thought of the consequences of its actions.

Stephen Kerr: On that point, the hon. Gentleman did not mention—it is worth mentioning—the salaries and bonuses the directors were awarding each other, which should bear on our minds as we consider the wee people and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) described and who we should all be thinking about.

**Justin Madders**: Absolutely. This is a tale of a corporate system out of control. It sends a real message about how not to run a company responsibly. I hope that some concrete action will come to prevent these kind of scandals happening in the future. Comparing the pension deficit to the bonuses paid really brings home how unfairly and avariciously certain people have behaved in this case.

While it is hoped that, in the short term, there will be some protection for jobs—as we have heard today and as I will go on to explore, there are some questions about the precise arrangements—we must not forget those who work for subcontractors and those who have already been made redundant who need our support as well.

I am told that there is an issue with the liquidators providing termination numbers to redundant Carillion staff. Some of those staff have given a lifetime to the company but have been told by the liquidator that, until that number is issued, their claims for notice pay and redundancy pay cannot be processed. Those who have received those details have been told that they may have to wait up to six weeks for the Redundancy Payments Service to actually process the payments.

As we know from the universal credit discussions we have had in here in recent times, expecting people to wait six weeks for payment after losing their job is far too long, so I do not see why we should allow that situation to occur here. I hope that, when the Minister next speaks to the liquidator, he will raise these issues and ensure that those who have been made redundant are able to access their statutory entitlements as soon as possible. Will the Minister inform us what resources have been allocated to the Insolvency Service to ensure that those payments are processed as quickly as possible?

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on securing this important debate. On apprenticeships, it is hugely important that apprentices are given alternative apprenticeships. However, in answer to a written question of mine, the Government said that apprentices who are not found an alternative apprenticeship will be paid after 31 January. Does my hon. Friend agree that clarity over how long they will be paid for is important, and that, when they are given a placement, a reasonable travel time is also crucial?

**Justin Madders**: I absolutely agree. While there has been some progress in finding apprenticeships for some of those who have lost theirs, there are still a huge number who have yet to be found one. We should not underestimate how important it is to get people trained in those skills that we will need in the economy in the future. I hope that more effort goes into that.

On the other companies in the supply chain and subcontractors, is the Minister able to tell us what analysis he has made of the number of companies in these sectors at risk of insolvency and the number of employees whose employment is in jeopardy as a knock-on effect of the liquidation? Has he done any analysis of the numbers affected who are perhaps working in another capacity on Carillion contracts—either through agency arrangements or zero-hours contracts? They are really little more than bystanders in this process and are powerless to do anything but accept their fate. I hope we are able to do something to assist those individuals.

As we know, when a particular function transfers, it is normally the case that staff are transferred over under the TUPE regulations. No one is suggesting for a minute that that is not a preferable situation to redundancy, but it seems that there are questions to be answered about the exact basis on which people will transfer over to their new employers. There should be no ambiguity from the Government on this. People’s existing contracts should be honoured in full. We should not have state-sponsored watering down of terms and conditions. The Government should not be a willing partner in the chipping away of employee rights.

**Jo Stevens**: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is an ideal opportunity for the Minister to confirm that TUPE, which obviously derives from the European Union’s acquired rights directive, will be maintained after Brexit, and that voluntary TUPE in these circumstances, to protect Carillion workers, could be offered as a commitment of that for the future?

**Justin Madders**: I certainly agree, and I would certainly like some clarity from the Government on a whole range of issues on the impact of Brexit. The acquired rights directive has been in place for some 30-plus years now. It is not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but it is particularly important in situations like this.

Even if there is a full TUPE transfer, we should not pretend that it will be happily ever after. The reality is that, in the majority of occasions when people transfer over to their new employers, sooner or later that employer will look to change the terms and conditions. When they say they are changing terms and conditions, they mean they are watering them down. We have already heard from some of my hon. Friends that there is considerable anxiety about that. It is a practice that has to stop.

The Government should stipulate that any company running a contract providing public services should respect agreed terms and conditions and look to adhere to the highest standards possible that a responsible
employer could adopt—proper rates of pay that provide a living wage, trade union recognition and collective bargaining rights and an occupational pension that is not paid into only when the employer feels like it but is there, as it should be, as part of deferred pay and as an essential part of the contract.

So TUPE applies a certain level of protection. It is far from perfect and often misunderstood, but, contrary to what many people think, it does not provide unlimited protection against changes to terms and conditions. It certainly has more than enough loopholes in it to allow a determined employer to ultimately do as it wishes. Because of the way in which our employment rights system works in this country, changing the terms and conditions of employees is easier to do than finding savings elsewhere. However, in these circumstances it is preferable to redundancy. Let us protect the jobs and get as many transferred as we can, but let us not for a second think that that is the end of the matter. Let us not perpetuate the merry-go-round of misery. Let us take the opportunity to say to whoever ends up running the contracts, “Please respect and protect the terms and conditions of the people who do the day-to-day work.”

The Prime Minister has said that the Government are a customer of Carillion, which is of course true, but we should be much more than a customer. We should be the champion of public services, the defender of the highest employment standards and an exemplar for the private sector of the kinds of companies that we want to see succeed in the country. Perhaps people thought Carillion was a success story at some point, but it was a success built on sand, on deception and on a varice.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my Unison comrade, the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith), on securing this debate. As a member of the inquiry into these matters, along with the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), I assure everyone that there will be pertinent questions tomorrow to the auditors and the Pensions Regulator. Clearly there are significant and very real questions as to how the company collapsed.

If a politician advocates the outsourcing model of public service delivery—for many reasons I do not subscribe to that theory—they have a duty and a responsibility to protect the workers who deliver those public services using that model. We have heard many examples in the speeches so far about the duty and responsibility that the Government should have in protecting the workers’ terms and conditions, wages and so forth. I gently say to the Minister that there is an immediate solution that he could take up now. He could agree to pick up the employment and wages of the workers. That can be found in clause 3 of my proposed piece of legislation, which is of course available in all good Vote Offices on the estate.

Such issues come up too often, which is why I propose legislation. Companies go bust or abscond, and leave workers exposed with nothing. We need to address that issue, so I hope the Government will take that up. I am sure the Minister will respond to that.

There should be a voluntary TUPE arrangement. Certainly in Scotland workers have been transferred to other companies to complete contracts. The hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) raised the issue of why contracts were issued after profit warnings were announced. The Scottish Government did not agree any contracts with Carillion after the first profit warning in July 2017. The UK Government awarded £2 billion of contracts after that profit warning was issued, including for HS2 and for Ministry of Defence bases. The second profit warning was on 29 September and yet the Government appear to have contracted work worth £62 million after that. Then there was a third profit warning on 17 November and the Education and Skills Funding Agency awarded a £12 million school building contract to Carillion. Will the Government tell us why? After the first profit warning, alarm bells should have sounded in Whitehall about why the company had secured such work.

There is a real issue with the pension scheme. As someone who has negotiated TUPE transfers, I am aware of the provisions under TUPE. New contractors like to wriggle out of putting in as much money as the public sector did—usually to 6%—and a lot lower than what the public sector put in. Has the Minister looked specifically at occupational pension scheme provision? That will be a real issue for this Parliament to deal with. When we see the Pensions Regulator asleep at the wheel—in this case fast asleep at the wheel—occupational pensions will be a real issue. The Work and Pensions Committee looked at the issue this morning. Will the Minister make a statement today on what occupational pension scheme provision will be given to workers who have transferred?

I again congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West on securing this debate. I hope the Government will listen to all hon. Members who have spoken today. I look forward to the Minister’s offer of a meeting with me to discuss my legislation.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): It is fantastic to have you chairing this debate today, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on securing it and on working so hard for her constituents. I know that her eagerness to secure this debate comes from a real anxiety about what will happen to all the workers.

What is wrong with the model of directly employed workers delivering contracts on behalf of the Government on such vital projects as school and hospital builds and prison maintenance; workers who have access to trade unions and vice versa; employers who afford rights and protections to their workers; and work that allows them to live a good life in security? Why not have a model whereby any profits made from the worker’s labour are
reinvested in the wages of the workers and the projects that the nation needs? What we saw at Carillion was the absolute opposite of that.

Carillion is not only a well-known blackmailer. From 2009 to 2016, it paid out £554 million in dividends— in other words, three quarters of the cash it made from operations. In the five-year period from January 2012 to June 2017, it paid out £333 million more in dividends than it generated in cash from its operations. We know that in the past six months Carillion issued three profit warnings. We also know that during that same period, as has been mentioned, and following those profit warnings, Carillion was awarded three contracts worth nearly £2 billion.

I know that Conservatives and those wedded to freedom of the market would maintain that a business does what it wants with its profits. It is up to them and there should be very little state intervention, but surely even those people—

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: If the hon. Gentleman will let me finish, he might agree with what I say next. Surely even those people can see that paying out more in dividends to shareholders than the amount made in profits—paying out three quarters of cash made from operations—is not a healthy way to run a business.

Stephen Kerr: I agree with the hon. Lady’s last point, but her description of what Conservatives generally believe about the marketplace is a fallacy. We believe very much in the operation of markets, but within the framework of law. Directors of companies have serious responsibilities, both legal and moral, for the conduct of their affairs. That accountability is framed by the law that regulates the marketplace.

Laura Pidcock: Thanks for explaining the nature of conservatism. That was very welcome. I think the contracts made after three profit warnings tell their own story.

That way of doing business is catastrophic for workers, and damages progress on desperately needed public infrastructure. Imagine all the investment that could have been made if even half the money that went to shareholders had been invested in public projects and workers. That is why the Labour party calls on the Government to bring the contracts back in house. The Government are not powerless in this situation, with potential mass job losses. The Government should hope at the very least for a Cabinet Office instruction on behalf of private sector workers, whose livelihoods are, as we know, no less important than those of people in the public sector.

It is extremely important that when workers transfer to a new employer, their individual contracts of employment and trade union recognition arrangements should follow them. So far, 980 workers have been made redundant and 7,500 have been transferred, but after all these weeks thousands of workers still face great uncertainty, as has been recounted in personal stories from constituencies. The Government, alongside the official receiver and special managers, must provide certainty.

The Government have said that the majority of employees who have already been transferred are on similar terms and conditions. What does “majority” mean—is it 51% or 99%—and what does “similar” mean? With three Conservative Members in the Chamber, I do not want to be accused of being overly sceptical, but the Government are hardly seen as a bastion of workers’ rights, and it is therefore unlikely that in this instance “similar” would equate to an upgrading of workers’ rights. As to those who were not transferred with similar conditions, what degradation was there of their terms?

The full scale of the catastrophe cannot just be forgotten as another failure of outsourcing, especially when, rather than resorting wholesale to an alternative model, the Government are simply allowing a similar operation to the one we see before us. That makes me very concerned about the long-term security of the jobs. How will the Government track the long-term outcomes for Carillion workers in their new employment and training places, as well as those for the self-employed and employees of subcontractors?

As the Government know, regulation 13 of TUPE, which places a duty on the official receiver and the special manager to inform and consult employee representatives in relation to TUPE transfers, is still a requirement even if regulations 4 and 7 do not apply. It is therefore important in setting workers’ expectations and giving clarity about their future. It relates to information about whether there will be a transfer—and the transfer date—as well as the legal, social and economic implications for any affected employees. Have the official receiver and special managers been complying with that duty? That is not clear. Are those representatives being informed and consulted? Worryingly, I read yesterday that Unite the union has discovered that Carillion did not pay into the NHS pension scheme in December 2017, even though deductions were made from employees’ salaries. I should like to know what happened to those pension contributions.

My final point is that there could be an argument that regulations 4 and 7 of TUPE apply in the case of Carillion. I understand that the usual position when a company is put into compulsory liquidation is that trading ceases and operations come to a complete halt. In an ordinary liquidation, priority is given to paying off creditors, and therefore regulations 4 and 7 of TUPE do not apply. In Carillion’s situation, the Government made it clear that the official receiver should instruct
some of the Carillion companies to continue with their operations—especially those relating to public sector contracts—so that the services being provided by Carillion could continue without a break. The Minister for the Cabinet office said:

“Let me be clear that all employees should continue to turn up to work confident in the knowledge that they will be paid for the public services they are providing.”—[Official Report, 15 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 624.]

The official receiver’s decision that some Carillion companies should carry on trading to safeguard and maintain the services that they are providing means that the liquidation has been conducted in the same way as an administration, in which regulations 4 and 7 of TUPE would undoubtedly apply.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths) indicated dissent.

Laura Pidcock: The Minister shakes his head; if he does not believe me, I point out to him the d’Urso case—that was my northern Italian pronunciation and I am happy to provide the Minister with my notes afterwards. The case considered whether the Italian version of TUPE applied to transfers effected by a company that was subject to a special administration procedure for large undertakings in critical difficulty. The special administration procedure had many of the features of a compulsory liquidation. None the less, the European Court of Justice decided that the business transfers directive could apply if it had been decided that the undertaking should continue trading, for so long as the decision to continue trading continued in effect.

3.27 pm
Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.44 pm
On resuming—

Laura Pidcock: When you suspended the sitting, Ms McDonagh, I thought that I had done something wrong or was being outrageous, but in fact there was a Division. I was pointing the Minister to the case in Italy. I urge him to look at it and consider the application in Carillion’s case, because there are so many similarities.

Where there is a will, there is a way. The political questions highlighted by the Carillion case are crucial. The model of outsourcing to companies that essentially leak taxpayers’ money to make rich people even richer has had its day. The same taxpayers who fund the obscene wealth of the shareholders face joblessness, degradation of their terms and conditions and a race to the bottom on what rights they will have left. We know that that model has had its day, but I am not sure that the Government do. However, the critical question today is what happens to the workers, their jobs, their pay, their terms and conditions and their security. I urge the Government to take decisive and reassuring action for thousands of these workers and to answer some of the critical questions that we have all posed here today.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Let me clarify that the debate will end at 4.16 pm; I do not want the Minister to feel that he has to abbreviate his contribution.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): Thank you, Ms McDonagh; it is great to have time to breathe and to think about what I will say. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. This is only my second Westminster Hall debate as a Minister, so please be gentle with me as we go.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on securing the debate. I know that she has been incredibly concerned about her constituents. We have spoken. I called her on the very day when Carillion went into insolvency. We have met and spoken on a number of occasions. I know that she brings this matter to the House because she is deeply concerned about the impact that the Carillion insolvency will have on her constituents and the people who work at the Wolverhampton headquarters.

We all recognise the impact that the Carillion insolvency has had and the weight of it. The Government have taken decisive action to mitigate the effects of the Carillion insolvency on employees and firms in the supply chain since it became clear that the company was in severe trouble. Although our No. 1 priority was to protect the vital public services delivered by Carillion, we have also sought to minimise the impact on the private sector and all the jobs that rely on it. Where private sector clients want services to continue, pending transition to another supplier, and have agreed to pay for those services, the official receiver has agreed to maintain them. Through the official receiver and the appointment of special managers, we have ensured that vital public services have been maintained.

There was some suggestion earlier of public services being at risk. We have actually seen an orderly, smooth transition. We have managed to protect the hospitals, prisons and schools—all the public services that rely on the services that were being provided by Carillion. That was our major priority, but of course we have an added interest in doing all we can to protect not only all the thousands of employees employed by Carillion, but the many thousands of jobs in the supply chain—the contractors who, through no fault of their own, find themselves in a difficult position because of the Carillion insolvency.

To date, as I think has been mentioned during the debate, 7,610 of Carillion’s UK employees have transferred to new employers and 1,141 employees have, sadly, been made redundant. I will come on to the support that we are putting in place for those who are made redundant. Carillion had more than 18,000 UK employees, and we hope that the special managers will announce further transfers of jobs and contracts in the very near future.

On 26 January, the Ministry of Justice, for example, announced the creation of a new, Government-owned facilities management company. There has been some suggestion, raised earlier in the debate, that we should transfer wholesale all of these contracts back into public ownership, back into administration by the state. Our approach has been pragmatic: when we can have a smooth transition to new private sector providers that maintains jobs and services, and returns money for the creditors—we must not forget that one of the main jobs for the special manager is to protect the interest of all those creditors owed money by Carillion—we will do so.
But when it is right that we take contracts back into public ownership and management, we will also do that. We have a pragmatic rather than a dogmatic approach.

Laura Pidcock: I thank the Minister for giving way so soon into his speech. I want to stress this point. The Government have essentially underwritten public sector contracts, so that they can continue, which I support. However, does he agree that that is not a usual feature of a compulsory liquidation? It is more like an administration procedure, and therefore TUPE regulations could apply.

Andrew Griffiths: That is the point the hon. Lady made in her speech. Let us be clear: Carillion is in insolvency, not in administration—there is a distinct difference in law. While the Government have stood behind Carillion to ensure that those public services continue to be delivered by the company during that smooth transition, in law, Carillion is in insolvency. I commend the hon. Lady on her Italian, but the point she makes is not relevant to the Carillion case, unfortunately. Later in my speech, I will explain why TUPE does not apply in this case.

The new company that I referred to, the GovCo from the Ministry of Justice, will ensure the delivery of, for example, prison facilities management previously provided by Carillion, including things such as cleaning, reactive maintenance, landscaping and planned repair building work. Those jobs have been taken in house to a GovCo. We have also seen positive signs regarding Carillion’s larger contracts.

As I said, a number of jobs have already been secured, but, as hon. Members will have seen, the media have recently reported on Serco’s and Brookfield’s interest in purchasing a number of contracts and transferring roughly 4,000 workers, although that is not yet confirmed. I understand that the official receiver and the special managers are working hard with customers to try to secure agreements, which will secure further jobs.

We also have to remember that some of these contracts are in the private sector and some are in the public sector. The Government were a customer of Carillion. We did not own Carillion. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) rightly pointed out that we did not ride to the rescue and bail Carillion out. Our intention was to protect public services and, wherever possible, protect the jobs that relied on them.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) has had to leave because of the Division, and I understand that. She mentioned in particular the issue of apprenticeships, which was also raised by other hon. Members. The Construction Industry Training Board, the CITB, has now conducted face-to-face discussions with all of the 1,400 Carillion apprentices and has so far found new employers for 725 of them. In addition, 180 of those were level 1 pre-apprenticeships, and those have been transferred to new training providers. The CITB is working to ensure that remaining apprentices are supported to find new employers and training providers. We are confident—the CITB is confident—that there will be opportunities and new apprenticeships for all of those apprentices who wish to continue with their studies.

As I said, we have had the question of whether TUPE should apply. While we welcome the protection of Carillion’s employees, and I fully understand the desire of the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West to protect the terms and conditions of the staff that she represents, it might just help if I explain to hon. Members that there are over 300 companies in the Carillion group, of which around 200 are based in the UK. Currently, 27 companies are subject to compulsory liquidation proceedings in the UK. When these companies are responsible for employing Carillion’s 18,000 employees, it is simply a matter of law that some elements of TUPE do not apply. Protections for transferring employers is a well-established principle that, as we have heard today, derives from EU legislation dating back to the 1970s. However, there are good reasons why key TUPE provisions do not apply when a company goes into liquidation.

The reason why TUPE is not applied in various insolvency situations, including liquidation, is that it is considered an obstacle to rescuing the businesses and saving jobs. That has to be our priority, of course. We want to rescue and secure these jobs. A decision taken by policy makers and Governments of all colours not to apply TUPE provisions in these cases is well understood, as are the reasons behind it. As a result, regulation 8 of the TUPE regulations 2006, covers insolvency proceedings and provides that these provisions do not apply “where the transferor is the subject of bankruptcy proceedings or…insolvency proceedings which have been instituted with a view to the liquidation of the assets of the transferor and are under the supervision of an insolvency practitioner.” That is exactly the case that we see here with Carillion.

There are two good reasons why the Government do not want to apply TUPE. First, it would undermine the intention of rescuing jobs, as I said. Secondly, to apply TUPE specifically to the present liquidation scenario would require an emergency Act of Parliament, creating a special statutory scheme for those named companies, having retrospective effects. That would cut across fundamental principles at the heart of our democracy. I am sure that no colleagues in Westminster Hall today would wish to do that. The compulsory application of TUPE to Carillion companies is not, therefore, a matter that can simply be agreed between the liquidator and the unions. There is legal precedence here that we cannot simply ignore.

Stephen Kerr: My hon. Friend is giving the position as it is, which is what has brought us to this debate. However, is it not possible for the Government, in relation to the public sector contracts, to stipulate, as the customer, that certain aspects of the contract roll over to the new company, such as the voluntary TUPE that has been referred to? Could they not insist on that?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. As we heard previously, the Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office has explicitly said that we wish to ensure that, wherever practical and possible, workers are not worse off. In fact, I can share with the House that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has had conversations with the special manager to implore him, wherever possible, to protect workers in that way.

However, as I said, we also have to be aware that a large proportion of these contracts are actually private sector. Of course, the legal requirements and stipulations
on the special manager, in order to be able to fulfil his duties and protect the interest of the creditors, are paramount here. It would be inappropriate for Ministers or any politician to try to interfere with that. As a result of agreements that we have seen in the press and entered into over the past few weeks to purchase contracts held by Carillion, we have secured those 7,500 jobs.

The hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) mentioned that we are on record as saying that most employees who have transferred so far have done so on existing or similar terms. The official receiver has worked to do that. I know that she would like more details—she would like an exact percentage, but she will also understand that given Carillion’s size, complicated governance and business structure and the difficulties in relation to managing the smooth transfer of these contracts, we do not yet have those exact figures. However, I am sure they will be available to her as soon as we have them.

In her speech, the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West raised the issue of support for employees. Understandably, this remains a very troubling time for employees and we will do everything we can to help those affected. Unless told otherwise, employees who are working will continue to be paid by Carillion during the liquidation. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling used the phrase “justice”—he wanted there to be justice for Carillion workers. It is not their fault that they find themselves in this perilous situation. I can say to him that those employees transferring across will still be eligible for redundancy payments. So if he is looking for justice, he may find that those payments go some way to delivering that.

Through the special managers, the official receiver has contacted all employees to explain the action being taken by Government and where they can seek advice and support. For example, the special managers and the Pensions Advisory Service have set up dedicated telephone support services. The special managers have a process in place to inform employees being made redundant in a timely fashion, and to give information about their employment status.

There was some suggestion earlier about delays in people being given the required information to be able to claim redundancy. We are in close contact with the special managers, and while we cannot guarantee that everybody has had the information as quickly as we would hope, there is a great imperative in these very difficult times for workers to ensure that they get access to the money that they have a right to receive. So we are working incredibly hard to try to ensure that happens as a matter of urgency.

We are also ensuring that practical support is available from Jobcentre Plus’s rapid response service. Hon. Members might be interested to know that so far Jobcentre Plus reports that it has had 34 claims by Carillion staff and 65 claims by individuals made redundant by firms in the Carillion supply chain. So thus far we have seen a small number of people turning up at Jobcentre Plus and claiming benefits.

I think the reason for that, in reality, is that these workers are incredibly valuable. They are a skilled, trained workforce in a tight jobs market. We have seen today that we have record employment in this country—unemployment is at levels not seen for 40 years. That is a great economic success, but it means that as the jobs market tightens the workers who we are talking about are greatly in demand.

**Eleanor Smith:** I have heard from my constituents that they have not received proper communication; I think that has been said across the different workforces. The fact that there are over 20,000 and only 20 have gone says something about the communication, which is not going to everybody.

**Andrew Griffiths:** I can honestly tell the hon. Lady that the rapid response team are exactly that. They give a report to the taskforce, which she asked about and I will come to. The rapid response team are working alongside the special managers. When people are made redundant, the team have all the details of the people involved and are proactively doing that. In addition, they are going into Carillion offices and, without causing concern, proactively advising people about opportunities and jobs that are available, and helping those people to prepare should they be made redundant.

In addition, the team are offering help with job searches, help to identify transferrable skills and training to update skills. This is a Rolls-Royce service. I can say on hand that the rapid response team are really excellent. If the hon. Lady has specific examples, I would be delighted to take those up on her behalf and to ensure that if somebody has been missed, we get in touch with them as quickly as possible.

Finally, I would like to set out the support that we are giving to those businesses affected by Carillion. We recognise that while the mass and the attention is on Carillion, the impact in the supply chain is huge. As hon. Members, we will probably all have people working in the supply chain in some way. As the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West mentioned, we have set up a taskforce; I think it was set up three days after Carillion went into liquidation. The taskforce includes representatives of small business and the TUC. She referred to a letter from Frances O’Grady; Frances sits on the taskforce, which meets at least weekly. We have the Federation of Small Businesses, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Cabinet Office, the Local Government Association and the Construction Industry Training Board. We are working across Government to address the challenges and to come up with solutions that will support affected businesses.

The Business Secretary and I are in regular contact with the construction industry and all of the relevant trade bodies. I meet them weekly to properly understand and respond to their concerns. Following the Business Secretary’s meetings in the aftermath of Carillion’s insolvency, when we called in the banks to ensure that they were providing the necessary support and help to the supply chain, the banks made nearly £1 billion available. That was from lenders such as HSBC, Lloyds, the Royal Bank of Scotland and Santander in the form of loans, credit facilities and further financial support, to ensure that the contractors in the supply chain that are affected get the help and support that they need.

For those companies that may have lost money as a result of Carillion’s collapse, the most important thing is their ability to continue earning. While they may have lost sums as a result of Carillion’s collapse, by standing behind Carillion we have allowed certainty for those...
businesses. I assure the House that while there have been some concerns about the payment terms of up to 126 days that we saw with Carillion, the special manager has entered into an agreement that he will pay contractors still providing services to the Carillion network in 30 days. That will go a long way towards helping those businesses—small businesses, in particular—that are struggling for cash flow. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is also helping businesses with its Time to Pay scheme.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned apprenticeships, which we have covered. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) made a number of points, but most importantly referred to two things. He referred first to the contracts awarded to Carillion after the profit warnings. The first thing to understand is that issuing a profit warning does not mean that a business is on the verge of imminent collapse; if that were so, we would have seen the collapse of Tesco and of Marks and Spencer. It is exactly that: a profit warning to the City and to investors to say that the profits that the company is about to issue will not be as large as expected.

In relation to the award of contracts after those profit warnings, Carillion announced that it had won eight public sector contracts after its first profit warning in July last year. Three of those, for facilities management, were for defence establishments. They were actually awarded before the profit warning, but Carillion chose to make its announcements some weeks later.

Two of the remaining five contracts were awarded by HS2 Ltd to a joint venture including Eiffage, a major French construction firm, and Kier, as well as Carillion. The three companies bid together as a consortium, and as a result all shared responsibility for completing the work. After the profit warning, we asked each partner’s board for written assurances that if one partner failed, the others had a contractual obligation to pick up the work. Those assurances were given. Since the announcement of Carillion’s liquidation, Eiffage and Kier have confirmed that the contracts will continue uninterrupted and that the former Carillion employees working on those contracts have been offered jobs with those new partners.

Following the announcement of the profit warning, a further assurance came from external due diligence commissioned by HS2 Ltd. That revealed that at the time of the award in July last year, Carillion had the financial capacity to continue with part of the contract. HS2 Ltd let the two contracts to the joint venture because it was confident that the joint venture arrangements were robust. That has proved to be the case.

The remaining three contracts were with Network Rail. They were not new contracts, but variations of contracts let some three years earlier, in 2014. Two were for electrification work. In a similar construct to the HS2 network, they were let to joint ventures between Carillion and the electrification specialist, SPL Powerlines.

Chris Stephens: Some of the information that the Minister has given will be helpful for tomorrow’s Select Committee inquiry, and I thank him for that. When a company that is applying for a Government contract issues a profit warning, what checks do the Government put in place and what checks is a public body expected to put in place to ensure that that company is solvent? We now know that after the first profit warning, the alarm bells should have been louder than they were.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. I wish to point out that the debate will finish at 4.16 pm and I hope to give Eleanor Smith, as the mover of the motion, a couple of minutes to sum up at the end.

Andrew Griffiths: Thank you, Ms McDonagh. I reassure the hon. Member for Glasgow South West that stringent checks are consistently carried out by the Cabinet Office and across Government. That preparedness ensured that there was a smooth transition, that contracts have been maintained and that public services have not been put in jeopardy.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the important work that the Select Committee has done. We have written to the Financial Reporting Council to ask it to look at the audit process to ensure that it is rigorous and fair, and to the Insolvency Service to ensure that it looks at things such as bonuses paid to current and previous directors so that, if necessary, we can claw them back.

In relation to pensions, the Pensions Regulator has oversight of pension schemes. As the Pensions Regulator is independent, it would be inappropriate for me, as the Business Minister, to comment, but I am sure the Select Committee will do further work to get to the bottom of the issue.

Finally, I reassure the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West that we in Government have done all we can to protect public services, support businesses in the supply chain that have been put in peril and secure jobs for all the hard-working people employed by Carillion. In terms of procurement and payment for small businesses, we will learn the lessons to ensure that we protect them as best we can in future.

4.13 pm

Eleanor Smith: I welcome the fact that 668 jobs have been saved so far. Nearly 1,000 workers have already been made redundant, however, and 11,800 are still hanging in the balance—we do not know what will happen to them.

I welcome the Government’s assurance that they will look into the situation, but I am a little disappointed that they could not assure me of protection for the workers under TUPE. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said that that had already been done in Northern Ireland, and I had hoped that the Minister would say that he had followed suit. Obviously, he has not. I encourage him to look at the Bill sponsored by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) to see whether there is a way for us to do it. We do not want to be in this situation again with another company.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions to the debate and for raising concerns about the protection of the Carillion workers. I also thank the Minister for responding to me, and I hope the Government will continue to look at protecting the Carillion workers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the application of TUPE to Carillion workers.
Child-to-Parent Violence

[GERAINT DAVIES in the Chair]

4.16 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered child-to-parent violence.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Child-to-parent violence is a very significant issue that, too often, is not spoken about. A parent in Chesterfield first raised the issue with me as part of a wider discussion about the paucity of support that they had received from Derbyshire County Council. As an adoptive parent, I was alarmed to learn of Adoption UK’s recent survey to which 3,000 of its 8,000 members responded. The survey revealed that as many as 63% of parents said that their adopted child had displayed aggressive behaviour. That followed Al Coates’ survey, which showed that 30% of adopters had experienced regular child-to-parent violence. The issue also affects around 3% of all families—some 330,000 children.

I will take this opportunity to highlight this important issue and invite the Minister, and all of us, to consider the extent to which current local authority interventions equip social workers and parents to tackle CPV. I will reflect on recent research in more detail and on the role that local authority funding cuts play in our ability to support successful adoptions. I will also ask whether the balance between protecting children and supporting their families is appropriately weighted. Finally, I would like to learn more about the specific steps that the Government are taking to investigate the scale of the issue and the support that they could put in place to help families.

Much of my contribution will focus on violence in families with adopted children, but clearly this is not purely an adoption issue. Families who have not adopted and do not have social services’ input or a diagnosis that explains why there are such problems can be even more isolated and alone, but my focus is predominantly on child-to-parent violence in adoptive families.

As parents, many of us worry that we are failing to live up to a media ideal of the perfect parent—I say that as the parent of a 19-year-old and a 15-year-old. As a nation, we are ludicrously time poor. The pressure on families to make ends meet and the demanding working environment that many families face, coupled with competing demands on our children, mean that modern parenting is a fraught business under the best of circumstances.

For adoptive parents, those pressures are often magnified. Three quarters of adopted children enter the care system because of abuse or neglect. Babies and children who have been victims of violence or physical, sexual or psychological abuse or have witnessed it routinely, who have been left to scavenge in bins because of neglectful or substance-dependent parents, or who have been left in the appalling situation of having to take over the parenting role at a very young age because of the inadequacy of their parent, will have experienced a level of trauma that can stay with them all their lives. Even in the womb, many children have disadvantages such as foetal alcohol syndrome or foetal alcohol spectrum disorders placed in their way. Chaotic, disruptive and disorienting experiences in the early years of children and babies, when they are at their most vulnerable, inevitably stockpiles future crises. It is a truism that hurt children hurt, and many adopted children have been badly hurt by the time they are adopted.

Adopting a child is not much like the brochures would have us believe. Adoption is not a silver bullet that takes children away from a bad situation and places them in a benign and friendly one that washes away all the scars of the past. One third of adoptive parents surveyed said that their local authority had withheld important information about their child before the adoption. Of course it is important that adopters are encouraged to come forward, and it is gratifying that despite all these problems, 88% of adoptive parents say they would still adopt and are glad they did. However, attracting adopters should never come at the expense of a pragmatic and realistic description of what life for an adopting parent can be like and of the many challenges that their children and family are likely to face. An appalling statistic that should give us all pause for thought is that children who have been adopted are 20 times more likely to be excluded from school and twice as likely not to achieve five good GCSEs.

Our starting point in countering child-to-parent violence must be to recognise the scale of the issue and ensure that it is widely discussed within the social work profession and more widely among adopter families. Parents who experience child-to-parent violence often question their own parenting and start to blame themselves. They wonder whether it is because of something that they have done, and whether if they had only taken a different strategy things would have been different. They take all sorts of steps to try to prevent it and they think it is a mark of their own failure. What they need is a support network that offers them strategies and understanding, rather than reinforcing the idea that they are to blame and that they and their families have become victims of violence as a result of their parenting.

We need a culture in which social workers realise that their work is not finished the minute the care order is signed and that adopted children need more support than other children. Supporting the family is part of that. After my wife and I adopted in 2004, we had a couple of cursory meetings in the run-up to getting the care order but, broadly speaking, that was it. After that stage, unless parents phone the social workers to say that there is a problem, they often get no further contact.

Many parents who experience violence from their children worry that if they highlight the extent of the problem, their parenting ability will be questioned and they will be taken down the route of child protection and investigations into their parenting, rather than the supportive environment they should have. Al Coates MBE—an adopter, a qualified social worker and a member of the Adoption Support Fund expert advisory group to the Department for Education—has interviewed many social workers and discovered that very few had had any formal training about child-to-parent violence.

The work of Al Coates and Dr Wendy Thorley, based on a survey of approximately 260 adopters, has led to a report called “Child-Parent Violence (CPV): an exploratory exercise”, which uncovered that as many as 30% of adopters had experienced violence. It also undermined the preconception evident in the Home Office report on adolescent-to-parent violence that this is an issue that relates to adolescence. It exposed the fact that the incidence of violence to parents is higher among seven
to 11-year-olds than among children aged 12-plus. It also revealed that child-to-parent violence is at the heart of many families in crisis and is a growing problem that, like many other forms of domestic violence, is hugely under-reported. Highlighting the issue and ending the culture of parental blame will help to address that under-reporting. It is important that we all play a role in ensuring that adoptive parents recognise that child-to-parent violence is a common challenge faced by many others, not a sign of their own failure. The Government should commission or support much more detailed studies of child-to-parent violence in adoptive families.

CPV will not begin to be addressed until there is wider acceptance of the scale of the crisis in child social work. A combination of growing caseloads, shrinking budgets, higher public and Government expectations, a more violent society and more family breakdowns is stretching the system to breaking point. A BBC freedom of information request has revealed a 25% increase in long-term sick leave among social workers since 2012-13. In the 135 councils that responded to the request, 1,911 social workers had been off sick for more than a month. That mirrors my own experience and that of many adopters whom I have supported or met: when we try to pursue issues or get support, the social worker dealing with the matter is often off sick and the person who comes in instead has only a very scant knowledge of the case history. They take an immediate look at whether the child is in danger, but if that is not the case, the support the family receive is very small.

The scale of social worker absenteeism and sickness is simply unsustainable. It inevitably means that corners will be cut, warning signs will be missed and the quality of interactions with families will be diminished. An obvious impact is that social worker caseloads will grow and many of the interventions that would support families and prevent them from reaching crisis point will play second fiddle to addressing immediate crises. Children who hurt others but who are not themselves at risk of being hurt will be seen as less of a priority. Children who hurt others but who are not themselves at risk of being hurt will be seen as less of a priority. The Government and that the pace of those cuts has continued since then. In the early years, there may have been fat loads will be based on whether a child is at immediate physical risk. Often, children who are violent to their parents or siblings are not themselves seen as being at risk, even though such violence can often be the cause of an adoption breaking down. A more holistic view, which recognised violent children within a family unit as a crisis in itself, would lead to better outcomes.

Given the scale of adoptive families who are affected by this issue, as suggested by the research I have cited, there is an argument for greater counselling and therapies for children post-adoption before the crisis manifests itself, and a much more substantial commitment to adopter support would prevent families from reaching crisis point and may well save money in the long run.

The Government’s Adoption Support Fund is a welcome development, but the cap on funding and the number of councils refusing to match fund therapies demonstrate the limitations of the current approach. When the Minister responds to the debate, can she say what representations she will make to the Treasury about the scale of the financial crisis facing councils, and the difficulty that crisis places on the Home Office in supporting local authorities to keep people safe?

I was very conscious in calling for this debate that this issue goes across three different ministerial Departments: the Department for Education, which has a child social work purview; the Department for Communities and Local Government, which deals with local authorities and their funding; and of course the Home Office itself. That was why I specifically focused my speech from an education point of view, although the Government have chosen to respond to it from a Home Office perspective. Nevertheless, all those different Departments have an important role in relation to this issue and inter-departmental work will obviously be very important.

I wonder to what extent the Minister, who is a Home Office Minister, accepts that local government finances will inevitably have an impact on the quality of child social work and the outcomes for adopted children. What steps will the Government take to ensure that new generations of social workers receive better training on the occurrence of child-to-parent violence, particularly among adopters, and ensure that parents are supported and not blamed? Will there be mandatory training for child social workers on child-to-parent violence, and will future continuous professional development of child social workers place an emphasis on child-to-parent violence?

In addition, will the Government ensure that there is skilled and appropriate therapy available to children who have been removed from violent or neglectful family situations at the start of the adoption, rather than government spending rounds to recognise that further council cuts will cost vulnerable children their lives and leave far too many families in crisis.
waiting for a crisis to manifest itself? Will there be an assumption that children who have experienced early trauma are likely to become violent themselves if that trauma is left untreated? Why do we wait for the crisis to grow until it is too large, when it could be more easily treated if it was addressed earlier? What steps can the Government take to ensure that the founding principles of the Children Act 1989 do not prevent the impact of violence by children being investigated because the child is not seen to be at risk?

What more can be done to ensure that the link between attachment difficulties and the education system is closer? Will the Minister commission a report to identify the scale of this issue and expressly recognise that this is not purely or even primarily an issue of adolescent violence but one that affects families with children of all ages?

Child-to-parent violence blights the lives of too many families; it must be a hidden problem no more.

4.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) on raising this important issue and on doing so in a very thoughtful way. Obviously, this issue affects him and his family, given his experience of adopting children. I pay tribute to him and to everyone across the country who finds the time and space in their families to give love and support to looked-after children, and the opportunities that those children deserve.

Last week, I attended an international conference on tackling violence against children. The Swedish Prime Minister spoke very movingly of his own experience of foster care. He had been looked after by foster parents and he talked about the opportunities that they had given him, which enabled him to become Prime Minister of his country. It was the most incredible story of love, support, opportunity and ambition. Perhaps in due course the hon. Gentleman’s children will follow in the footsteps of the Swedish Prime Minister.

I am responding to this debate on behalf of the Home Office. As the hon. Gentleman has rightly pointed out, this is an issue for which several Government Departments have responsibility. I hope that he will forgive me if I respond from a Home Office perspective, and of course I will ensure that my ministerial colleagues in the Department for Education and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government respond to the specific points that relate to them.

The reason the Home Office is responding to this debate is that while of course we have responsibility for crime, we are also very conscious that child-to-parent violence is an issue that is often neglected, even though it can have a devastating impact on the families concerned. Currently there is no legal definition of child-to-parent violence, but it is increasingly recognised as a form of domestic abuse. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman spoke very thoughtfully about the impact of babies and children witnessing domestic abuse in their homes, including the impact it can have on them developmentally, not only in childhood but in adulthood.

That is precisely why the Government hope to include in the draft domestic violence and abuse Bill, which we will seek to introduce in this Session, a measure that reflects the impact that domestic abuse has on children. That will be one of the most important measures in that Bill. We want to make it an aggravating feature of any domestic abuse offence if there are children present in the home when that abuse is carried out, to try to draw out and show the terrible effect that it has on young people.

It is very important to understand that, as with other forms of domestic abuse, child-to-parent violence is not only about physical violence. It is also likely to involve a pattern of behaviour that can encompass, but is in no way limited to, psychological, emotional, economic and physical abuse. It is an incredibly complex problem that presents a number of challenges to families who experience it. Family members may feel isolated and stigmatised, and they may even feel shame for being the victims of violence at the hands of their children. They may not know where to go for help and, as the hon. Gentleman has articulated, they may worry that if they do reach out for help, judgments will be made about their parenting skills and the children may be removed from them.

That is why the Government commissioned a 2015 report, “Information guide: adolescent to parent violence and abuse”, which provides materials and advice to support professionals in the police, the health system, the justice system, the education system, youth services and so on, when someone comes to them for help. I hasten to add that although the title refers to adolescent violence, the advice does not just apply to adolescents; it can of course apply to children under the age of 16 as well.

There are also at least two charities that can offer help and support to family members who are suffering from this kind of violence, including the free and confidential helplines that are run by Family Lives and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Child-to-parent violence includes not only violence by young people living in the family home, but adult children’s violence towards their parents. Sadly, that issue is similarly hidden and equally poorly understood.

Because of issues such as stigma and the worries that people may have about reaching out for help, there are no specific national statistics on child-to-parent abuse. However, we know that there are approximately 11,000 victims of domestic abuse every year. Family Lives, a national charity, reported that over a two-year period its helpline received more than 22,500 calls from parents reporting aggression from their children. Also, the Office for National Statistics has shown that in the year ending March 2017 there were 11 recorded parricides, which gives an indication of how serious these cases can become and the number of families who are torn apart by this type of abuse.

Such abuse can affect all levels of society. There may be a history of domestic abuse within the house, but equally there may be other factors that exist alongside the abuse, including substance misuse, behavioural problems, learning difficulties and mental health issues. There is no single explanation for the abuse to which some parents are subjected.

In terms of the complexity, it is important to break the silence on this abuse, which is why I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. Also, we know that exercises such as the recent storyline in the soap opera “Hollyoaks” have helped draw the issue to the public’s attention.
What have we done? The hon. Gentleman rightly and understandably asked for action. We have committed £920 million towards the troubled families programme, which aims to achieve significant and sustained progress for 400,000 families with complex needs by 2020. I fully appreciate that the adopted families he spoke to may not fall into that category, but none the less we have invested that significant sum of money to help families who are troubled. The programme works to support families through a dedicated key worker who works with them to draw up an action plan. It can include support for families where there is child-to-parent violence.

The hon. Gentleman asked about social care. In addition to the troubled families programme, the Government have identified that we need to support councils to identify improvements to children’s social care. We have made £200 billion available for local services, including children's social care, up to 2020. In addition, the Department for Education has funded a number of projects with a specific focus on tackling domestic abuse as part of our children's social care innovation programme, which is backed by £200 million. As part of the Government’s domestic violence and abuse Bill agenda this year, there will I hope be lots of national conversations about domestic abuse in its various forms. I would welcome the hon. Gentleman’s help in raising this issue so that we can see whether there are other measures we should be employing.

We are conscious that domestic abuse is not just about physical violence. It can be about emotional and mental abuse as well. That is why we introduced the new domestic abuse offence of controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship in the Serious Crime Act 2015. We know that safeguarding is critical to helping families where there is child-to-parent abuse, rather than necessarily criminalising the child, with all the repercussions that has for their future career prospects and so on. We want to help and support professionals in identifying and dealing with the earliest signs of abuse, to stop violence before it happens and to prevent abusive behaviour from becoming entrenched. Critically, we want to provide victims and their families with support before a crisis point is reached. That is why we have the information guide I mentioned. I encourage Members to read it if the issue has come to them through their constituency casework. It provides guidance for practitioners.

In conclusion, we must and will do more to tackle the tyranny of domestic abuse and, in doing so, promote greater awareness of the different forms it takes. Our forthcoming consultation on the domestic violence and abuse Bill, which will be launched shortly, and the package of non-legislative measures that will sit alongside that Bill provide an opportunity to transform agencies’ responses to domestic abuse, to make tackling it everyone’s business and to promote a national conversation to bring this abuse out of the shadows. I hope I have reassured the hon. Gentleman of the Government's commitment to tackling this terrible form of abuse, and I thank him very much for raising the issue.

Question put and agreed to.

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**East Midlands Ambulance Service**

4.44 pm  

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the performance of East Midlands ambulance service.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Davies. The ambulance service is the glue that holds our health service together, and it does an incredible job. I have heard some harrowing examples in recent weeks of ambulance waits, but I want to start by putting that into context. Last October, my constituent Vinnie fell down stairs in the early hours and hit his head so hard that his heart stopped. The 999 call handler talked Vinnie’s partner Jo through cardiopulmonary resuscitation to keep him alive until the ambulance arrived 15 minutes later. That crew literally saved his life. Vinnie and Jo want to say thank you to those people, but they do not know their names. On behalf of Vinnie and Jo and everyone for whom our ambulance services have done amazing things, thank you.

Ambulance crews do amazing things every day, but they are struggling, especially in the east midlands. Our response times have consistently been below the average and near the bottom of the regional tables. In January, the east midlands came ninth out of the 10 regions in responses to category 1, 2 and 3 calls. On category 2 emergency calls, which have a target average response time of 18 minutes, East Midlands ambulance’s average was 37 minutes—more than twice as long.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): We used to have a Lincolnshire ambulance service, which I thought provided a very good service, but we were told that the way to get a better service was to regionalise and effectively centralise. We now find that many ambulances are taken off to Leicestershire or Nottinghamshire—no doubt for a good cause—and they do not come back to Lincolnshire. Does that not underline the need for localism and local services run by local people?

**Ruth George**: To be honest, when I was at East Midlands ambulance HQ, the waiting time at Lincoln hospital was seven hours for patient handover. Unfortunately, in those situations ambulances are diverted to where patients who need help urgently can get the care they need. Part of the problem is the handover times, particularly at Lincoln.

The longest 10% of urgent responses took more than 82 minutes, which is twice the target of 40 minutes. For category 3 urgent calls, 10% of East Midlands calls took more than three hours 22 minutes against a target of two hours. In practice, that means that people who are very seriously ill or in pain are waiting hours and hours for an ambulance. My constituent, Debbie, contacted me on Saturday night at 10 o’clock. Her 82-year-old mum had a hairline fracture of her hip. It had not been diagnosed, and suddenly her mum found herself in excruciating pain and unable to move. Despite calls to 111 and then 999, there was simply no ambulance available.

It was only when Debbie called at midnight and said that her mum was passing out of consciousness due to exhaustion and pain that the call was upgraded to category 2 and the ambulance arrived 20 minutes later. By then her mum had been waiting in agony for more
than nine hours. The ambulance crew apologised, but they had been on more urgent calls the whole time. Debbie and many other constituents have contacted me to ask, “Why is this happening?”

A few weeks ago, I visited the ambulance control centre at Nottingham to see the management of East Midlands ambulance calls across the whole region. It was a Friday lunchtime, but even at that time the emergency calls and urgent calls were stacking up. I listened in as people were calling back to find out how long an ambulance would take. Health professionals, families, neighbours and shop assistants were all caring for someone who was seriously ill and needed an ambulance. They were undergoing hours of pain, worry and uncertainty.

From that experience and from speaking to local paramedics and East Midlands ambulance managers, it seems that there are four key reasons for the issues. The first is our geography. East Midlands ambulance covers a huge area, from the border of Manchester in my constituency to the shores of Lincolnshire. It has the second lowest population density in England after the south-west, but also the second-lowest investment in transport infrastructure after the north-east. It is not only a large region; it is hard to get around.

Secondly, when ambulances do get their patient to hospital, they encounter some of the longest waits for transfers. In 2015-16—the latest figures that we can obtain—only 44% of handovers in the east midlands were completed within 15 minutes, compared with 58%, on average, across England. This winter, handover times in some hospitals have got much worse. At my constituents’ local A&E at Stepping Hill, ambulances were waiting for more than three hours. At Lincoln hospital, it was more than seven hours. When vulnerable people are waiting in severe pain for an ambulance, to have them queued up outside hospitals unable to hand over their patients is incredibly frustrating.

The third issue is the level of demand. In the east midlands, the number of responses rose from 222,000 in 2011-12, to 335,000 in 2016-17—an increase of more than 50%.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I thank EMAS for coming to meet with the northern Lincolnshire and Lincolnshire group of MPs last year, when we were concerned about ambulance provision. Subsequent to that, paramedic Lee Hastie gave an account to the local Grimsby Telegraph about his experiences, particularly in relation to demand for ambulance services, saying that most of his calls on an everyday basis now relate to drug and alcohol abuse. Does my hon. Friend consider that cuts to local government drug and alcohol services have gone some way to increasing the demand on our ambulance services? They are essential services that, at a community level, simply are not there any longer.

Ruth George: I would certainly concur with that statement. It is one of many areas in which the lack of services at an urgent level is creating an increased demand—but in no way has East Midlands ambulance service’s funding increased to cover that level of demand, as we will see later.

Part of the increase is due to the 111 service. We saw the chaos that 111 created when the coalition Government brought it in to replace Labour’s NHS Direct with a much cheaper service with hardly any clinicians. Things have improved, but at busy times the 111 service still does not have enough qualified staff to make decisions, so the call-handlers have to be risk-averse, follow their script, and call out an ambulance if there is any doubt at all.

We have seen the number of 111 calls resulting in an ambulance call-out gradually increase from 100,000 in 2011-12 to 1.3 million across England in 2015-16. That is almost 14% of all ambulance call-outs going to people who did not request an ambulance in the first place—people such as my constituent Gemma. She suffered abdominal pain and called 111 for an out-of-hours doctor to come and see her. Even though Gemma told the call-handler that if she needed to get to hospital she would drive herself there, they still sent an ambulance to her. Gemma was diagnosed with gallstones, and next time she had an incident and needed pain relief urgently she again called 111 to tell them that she knew what the problem was and to ask for a prescription. Instead, they again insisted on an ambulance and would not accept a refusal. Gemma actually drove herself to A&E because she was so determined not to use ambulance time.

The ambulance service says that it is not allowed to reassess 111 calls that have been allocated for an ambulance response, so even if it expects that it is not necessary, it cannot use its expert clinicians to provide the telephone advice and decide whether an ambulance is really necessary. I will get on to the question of resources shortly, but besides resources, my local paramedics have asked whether the ambulance service can reassess 111 calls that it is given if it is in any doubt. I put that question, from them, to the Minister.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for the very strong case that she is making: she is an outstanding campaigner for our region. Nottingham city MPs are very concerned about this issue; I am the only one present because my two colleagues are on other parliamentary business. We would like to see real evidence of the provider coming together with unions, clinicians and service users to try to iron out some of the issues that my hon. Friend is talking about. Does she agree that that would perhaps be a good way to manage the resources that we have?

Ruth George: We can always seek to manage resources better, but East Midlands ambulance service has been seeking to manage resources for a very long time, working with Unison and the unions there.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the closure of Lincoln’s walk-in centre, despite the fact that 94% of the people who responded to the consultation said that they did not want it to close, cannot fail to have a further impact on EMAS and local services? We are told by the clinical commissioning group that it will not have an impact and that there will be other provision, but the local ambulance teams—I will come to this point when I give my speech—told me that it will absolutely have an impact. I wonder what her thoughts are on that.

Ruth George: Walk-in centres were established by the last Labour Government to reduce the demand on the ambulance services and to give people the services that they actually needed on their doorstep. Every cut of every walk-in centre is hugely worrying, both for patients and the ambulance service.
Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Demographically, patients attending A&E, which treats accidents and emergencies, not anything and everything, are the very sickest patients, or those patients requiring treatment such as X-rays that cannot be delivered in centres such as a general practice. The review into the walk-in centre, as I understand it, and as it has been explained to me, was actually done by clinicians rather than politicians. The clinicians are telling us that it will not have an effect because, demographically, the patients going to the walk-in centre are those who are relatively well. If the walk-in centre was closed, they would be making their own way to the hospital, a general practice or a pharmacy, rather than calling 999.

Ruth George: The fact is that walk-in centres are open late in the evenings and at weekends, and in most GP practices it is not possible to get an urgent appointment without phoning at 8 am exactly. In my constituency, people have to wait at least two weeks to get an appointment.

Karen Lee: When I went out with the ambulance team, one of the people who called and got an ambulance was an elderly gentleman of 91 who had breathing problems. He called an ambulance because he could not get a GP appointment or get to the walk-in centre at that point. It is not always people who are desperately ill who call ambulances; lots of people call ambulances in sheer desperation because they cannot get anything else.

Ruth George: That illustrates the point completely. We have seen a lack of primary care services, and doctors’ appointments are far harder to get than the 48 hours it took under a Labour Government. In consequence, we have a hugely overburdened ambulance service.

Now we come to funding. East Midlands ambulance service is already one of the most efficient in all the regions. In spite of the relatively sparse population and demanding geography, EMAS’s costs per face-to-face response are the third-lowest of all the regions—9% lower than the average across England. The costs per call are, again, the third lowest and more than 10% below the average.

By any measure, East Midlands ambulance service is very efficient, with 99% of its staff working on the frontline. Almost all managers take shifts so that they know exactly what is going on. It has cut all that it can, and it has had to make cuts, because EMAS has the second-lowest funding of all the regions—8% lower than the average across England. Only the North East ambulance service, which serves a more densely populated area, has lower funding than the East Midlands ambulance service.

The funding has not kept pace either with inflation or with the increased demand—in fact, it has barely increased at all in the last six years. In 2010-11, EMAS received £160 million for patient care activities. By 2016-17, we had seen over 16% inflation and a 50% increase in activity. Funding should be at least two thirds higher—£105 million extra would be the proportionate cost. Instead, East Midlands ambulance service received less than £5 million extra compared with 2011. That is less than 3% extra funding when it needed 66%.

East Midlands ambulance service has never been well funded—our region has always been the poor relation, as colleagues on both sides of the House often concur—but the cuts over the last seven years have made it impossible for it to meet its targets, and to deliver the right standard of service and care to some of the most sick and injured people, and the most at risk. That is what the Nottinghamshire coroner concluded in May 2016. In an urgent case review, she said:

“Demand is clearly greater than the resources they have most of the time”.

That is not the fault of any of the staff at EMAS. Last summer, the Care Quality Commission found that although the service was in need of improvement, it was caring and responsive—but it could not be safe or effective.

The report states that there were “caring, professional staff delivering compassionate, patient focussed care in circumstances that were challenging due to the continued demand placed on the service.”

The increased demand for primary care, emergency care and ambulance services is not being resourced. Our ambulance service is on the frontline. Our crews do their very best, but it is tough. Yes, staff sickness is slightly higher than average at EMAS, but I am not surprised. It is not just what the crews deal with; it is the constant stress and pressure, and the distress and anger that they sometimes face when they can finally arrive.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a very articulate and compelling case, but I think she would be the first to acknowledge that, while there may well be a resource challenge of the kind she described—she has already made that clear—there are issues around administration, management, process and protocols. She has already mentioned ambulances waiting outside hospitals for a very long time because they cannot or will not admit patients. Those are systemic problems, not just resource problems.

Ruth George: It might not be a resource problem at EMAS, although EMAS has been trying to fix that with staff put on especially to try to reduce the handover times at hospitals. A&E departments are struggling at absolute capacity. My local hospital had 97 A&E patients in need of a bed last weekend, and they had seven beds. The fact that the number of beds in the NHS has been reduced by 14,000 since 2010 is a resource issue. It might not be an EMAS issue, but it is very much a resource issue, and I put that to the Minister along with the issue of EMAS.

The situation is not fair on our ambulance crews. It is not fair on our patients. Our ambulance service is holding emergency care together. East Midlands is doing it with more pressure and less resources than almost anywhere else in the country. It needs support from us and it needs the resources to meet its targets. I call on the Minister to commit to that today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. Five people want to speak, so I am going to impose a time limit of five minutes so that there is enough time for wind-ups. I call Dr Caroline Johnson.

5.2 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for High Peak
Following my work in A&E over the Christmas period—I still practice as a paediatrician—I met the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to discuss that point. I understand he and the civil service are looking at it, and I would be grateful for an update from the Minister on how that work is progressing. I believe that it would improve not just patient care but also the ambulance response times in the community.

The second issue I want to talk about is the type of ambulance crew. Many people are of the view that when an ambulance crew arrives, it contains the same level of skill mix, regardless of which ambulance comes, but that is actually not the case. There are highly trained specialist technicians and there are paramedics, who have additional levels of skill. There can be situations where, because we need to direct the correct crew to the correct problem—for example a particularly ill patient might need a paramedic and another patient might need a technician—there might be two crews near two patients going in opposite directions, taking longer to get to somebody. That is because they are not all paramedic crew. Although that probably makes little or no difference to response times in a city centre, in a rural area, where response times will always be longer because of the geography involved, we should increase the number of paramedics, perhaps having all paramedic crews. If we were in a position where all crews were paramedic crews, an ambulance would always go to the nearest casualty and not necessarily the matched one, which would improve response times. In addition, we can increase the number of patients who receive care en route.

We hear a lot about the golden hour—patients that need treatment within that first hour of care. If they get treatment in that first hour, we know they get better outcomes in the long term. If we are sending a technician crew who are perhaps not able to provide some of the treatments that a paramedic crew can, the patient is not getting that. Again, in a city centre where the transfer time might be five minutes, perhaps that does not matter as much as it does in a rural area, where once the ambulance has got to the patient, simple geography may mean that it takes 40 or 30 minutes to get back to the hospital.

In summary, we hear a lot about the problems that the ambulance service has. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) that a Lincolnshire service would provide a better solution than one that covers such a wide geographical area as the east midlands, but I would be grateful if the Minister could look at the other potential solutions.

5.8 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I have three points to put to the Minister. No. 1—will the Minister commission a report into the locations that have disproportionate numbers of ambulance call-outs by East Midlands ambulance service? I have highlighted one previously—Sports Direct in Shirebrook, which was getting more than a hundred a year. What was going on there was that the workforce was not allowed to make GP or other appointments in work time and therefore were continuing at work, fearful of taking any time off when sick, until they required an ambulance to be called. That could have been solved in very simple ways, but EMAS did not investigate the fact that there was an extraordinary level of call-out there.
A more common example is a care home that does not have properly qualified nursing staff, and therefore over-uses ambulances. I suggest to the Minister that if there are more than, say, 20 call-outs to one location, EMAS ought to be required to go in to see exactly what the solution is. The solution is not to send ambulances there expensively if they ought to be elsewhere saving lives. It is a simple process. It is amazing that that was allowed to happen at Sports Direct. The stats were there, but there was no intervention.

No. 2 is privatisation. One of the problems with EMAS—

Mr Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way before he rushes from No. 1 to No. 2?

John Mann: I will.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is again making a compelling case. He is actually arguing that demand varies, and that we need to look at the character of demand, at how we respond to it, and at the drivers of demand. It is of course always about resources, but it is not just about resources. The hon. Gentleman is making that case in his typically sophisticated way.

John Mann: A very wily intervention by an experienced Member. I look forward to such a commission, which I think would be very helpful to the Government and residents of the east midlands.

The absurd privatisation of the non-emergency ambulance service in the east midlands—Arriva is responsible for it in Nottinghamshire—was cross-subsidised. The £5 million that it really cost EMAS came from, in essence, ambulances that were diverted. Put simply, if there was an emergency call, an ambulance ferrying somebody routinely to hospital would be diverted, and the patient waiting would wait an hour longer. That was a rational cross-subsidisation. The moment it was privatised—sadly in 2009 by a Mr Burnham, under EU procurement rules—there was a serious deterioration. It is obvious in an area that is rural, but not just, that an ambulance going from point A to point B that could be immediately diverted into being an emergency ambulance would increase the capacity significantly. Reversing that privatisation with the freedoms we are about to have once we have left the European Union would be a significant improvement for the NHS.

No. 3, most controversially, is geography. Why is the ambulance service based on the east midlands? I am not exactly sure where the east midlands is. The South Yorkshire ambulance service operational base is actually in the east midlands—it is across the border in Chesterfield.

Senior managers were clear to me in private that for certain areas, including mine, given that ambulances go to hospitals in Bassetlaw, Chesterfield, South Yorkshire, Doncaster and Sheffield, which they do—all heart attack patients in my area go directly to Sheffield and all stroke patients go directly to Doncaster—rationally we should be part of the South Yorkshire ambulance service. It makes no sense to have this historical, arbitrary divide, given that in the practical, real NHS world any business would have reorganised it in that way. The fact that the major response centre for South Yorkshire is actually in the east midlands demonstrates that point vividly. We need a bit of common sense here.

We need a reversal of privatisation. As it was an absurd Labour-inspired proposal initially, it will be easier for the Minister to agree to that and to whack Mike Ashley and other misusers of the service. Rather than simply respond to the people who are wrongly using the service, they could be, if necessary, publicly embarrassed so they change their systems. I offer those three easy options to the Minister.

5.14 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I pay tribute to the workers on the frontline of the East Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust. At a constituency event, I met one who had had two teeth knocked out by a patient he was trying to help. He said, literally, “It is all in a day’s work.” Those dedicated people are doing great work. I want everything I say after this to be taken in that context.

EMAS receives a call every 34 seconds. It has been keen to embrace innovations—for example, it has done work in Lincolnshire on sepsis—which complements some of the challenges we face at United Lincolnshire Hospitals NHS Trust. It is telling that six of the seven Lincolnshire Members of Parliament are here in this Chamber. Lincolnshire faces the greatest challenges, although I do not want to diminish the challenges that EMAS faces elsewhere.

Originally, we had a Lincolnshire ambulance service. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) has said, EMAS was created to fix some of the problems we had in Lincolnshire, but I suggest to the Minister that it has palpably not done that. Some of the problems relate to handover. Only yesterday, a constituent informed me that there were 10 ambulances queuing outside Pilgrim Hospital, and he has informed me that at one point today there were 11. I make that point not to criticise a single member of the ambulance service but to endorse the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson). It is clear that we face problems, and we should look at how to solve them.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) made a fair point when he said that there are problems with the management at EMAS. To give but one example, I have raised problems with EMAS every time I have attended health debates in this place, and EMAS has not made a single proactive attempt to reach out to explain even what it is trying to do. I suggest that the waiting times and the service we get from management indicate that the ambulance service is not serving us, as the elected representatives of patients, or patients themselves. This is a serious situation.

I have a number of suggestions to put to the Minister. First, he should support the Lincolnshire County Council manifesto commitment to create, or at least to explore, a Lincolnshire ambulance service. In various parts of Lincolnshire—particularly in my coastal, sparsely populated constituency—there is a huge drain on resources as ambulances inevitably go westwards and do not come back. A Lincolnshire ambulance service, using sensible modern technology, could achieve a great deal more than what was possible under the previous regime, and would address some of the challenges we face simply due to the rather random creation of EMAS—as the
hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) has said, the east midlands is an area that does not really exist in the mind of the public.

To go slightly further, it would be good to see the Minister continuing the work that was done prior to the reshuffle, looking at what we can do sensibly to combine blue-light services. We already do some creative work in Lincolnshire with the fire brigade. We do some really important, sensible things that allow the fire brigade to save lives. Indeed, in some cases, they are saving lives that, under previous, unreformed systems, would not have been saved. There is good work to build on.

Karen Lee: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we ask firefighters to extend their role, that should be properly resourced and funded and not just given as an extra job on top of what they do already?

Matt Warman: I agree, of course, that we need the resources and reform package that will put us where we need to be. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings has said, the issue is not solely about money—though to be fair to everyone present, I do not think that anyone is pretending otherwise—but of course proper resources are a big part of the equation.

Sensible moves on a blue-light combination would be a logical thing to do. I also think that one of the problems we face—this relates both to the issue of handover and to the number of ambulances waiting outside hospitals—is in large part due to the recruitment and retention challenges we have in Lincolnshire. A medical school in Lincolnshire would play a part in solving some of those problems. I say that in part because we need to recognise that this is a system problem, not solely an EMAS problem.

In conclusion, I was all set before the debate to stand here? He has just walked out, has he? He was here. I am sorry, but this is utterly political: why do we starve public services of resources? It is all right to say that we cannot give them enough money but cut taxes, frankly that is immoral.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I personally have witnessed how hard EMAS staff work. I pay tribute to their professionalism and dedication.

On 18 January my right hon. Friend for Islington North came to Lincoln, we went to the heart centre. I am also aware of stuff that has come through my post bag about people with chest pains waiting two and a half hours for an ambulance. The figures for issues such as door-to-balloon time are all going up at Lincoln County Hospital because people who are actually having heart attacks cannot get an ambulance. They are at risk of going into an arrhythmia, whether it be VT or VF—ventricular tachycardia or ventricular fibrillation—because they are having a heart attack. They are not getting the treatment they need, because they are waiting for an ambulance.

Our NHS is in crisis. It is time that the Government acknowledged that. If A&E is so packed that ambulances cannot hand over, the NHS is in crisis—please admit that and let us do something about it. What is happening with EMAS is symptomatic of the situation. NHS workers are underpaid right across the board, with a pay cap, and they are understaffed. All those things work together. I feel sorry for EMAS—at the moment it is set up to fail and there is nothing it can do about that. I am sorry, but this is utterly political: why do we starve public services of resources? It is all right to say that we are giving them money, but we are not giving them enough money. When we do not give them enough money but cut taxes, frankly that is immoral.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I call Ben Bradley. Is he here? He has just walked out, has he? He was here. I am sorry about that. I will call the first Front Bencher instead.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Davies. Perhaps the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) had a call from his lawyers.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): He has called an ambulance, I should think.
Justin Madders: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this debate. She has again shown that she is a strong advocate for issues in her constituency. She described the ambulance service as the glue that binds the NHS together; I would go further and say that all the staff are that glue who bind the service together.

My hon. Friend reeled off a whole range of statistics about performance in EMAS. The ones that stuck out for me were the nine-hour wait for an ambulance and the queuing times at hospitals, which were also mentioned by a number of other hon. Members. She talked about the risk-averse approach of 111; although clearly no one wants that to go too far the other way, I know that more clinicians are now working for 111. I will be interested to hear whether the Minister feels the balance is now right.

We heard from a number of Members, but unfortunately I will not have enough time to go through all the contributions. In a very thoughtful and relevant speech, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) made some interesting points about whether staff are utilised as effectively as we might like.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) made some interesting points about geography—he should look at some of the sustainability and transformation plans too, to see whether the geography there makes any sense—and privatisation, which probably got a fairer look at some of the sustainability and transformation road?

As a number of hon. Members said, geography is clearly a big issue. As we also heard, the trust is one of the most poorly performing in the country. The sparsity of population is clearly driving that problem. The staff are utilised as effectively as we might like.

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As a number of hon. Members said, geography is clearly a big issue. As we also heard, the trust is one of the most poorly performing in the country. The sparsity of population is clearly driving that problem. The staff are utilised as effectively as we might like.
Lincolnshire Members of Parliament were present; this issue generates considerable interest both among Members and the constituents that they serve. I assure the hon. Lady that we are taking her concerns seriously. We recognise that the trust’s performance needs to improve. A range of local and national actions are under way to support it in doing so, and I will set out more details about that.

Key measures include the implementation of a new urgent care transport service, to take pressure off emergency ambulance responses; action to address handover delays at hospitals across the east midlands area; and a demand and capacity review of the trust, to ensure that it has the right levels of resource.

5.32 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

6.2 pm

On resuming—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. Minister, over to you; if you would like, you could allow a couple of minutes at the end for the mover.

Stephen Barclay: I will be happy to, Mr Davies. As I was setting out before the votes, a number of key measures have been announced. I will elaborate on those further, but, before I do, I will address some of the points raised by colleagues across the House in this constructive and well-supported debate.

The hon. Member for High Peak very reasonably opened her remarks by putting some of the challenges in the context of the good work being done. She cited in particular the case of her constituents, Vinnie and Jo, which illustrates the fantastic work done alongside some of the challenges that we will come on to. She also mentioned specific issues faced in terms of geography and low population density.

The hon. Lady mentioned empowerment of 999 call staff as a specific issue. My understanding is that revalidation can be done by call handlers where they are clinically trained, but not where they are not. Even where they are clinically trained, it cannot be done if the initial 111 call is either a life-and-death call—a category 1 or category 2 call—or where the initial assessment has been done by someone from 111 who is clinically trained. There is a framework there, but I am happy to have a further conversation with the hon. Lady if she has areas of specific concern about how that guidance is operated. She will be aware that, in any event, only 12% of NHS 111 calls are referred to ambulance trusts, so the 12% is a subset initially; within that, there is a subset of those who are clinically assessed and what power there is. I am, however, very happy to have a further conversation.

The hon. Lady also mentioned funding, which I will come on to specifically. The trust has had additional funding, but on the challenges set out by colleagues from across the House, the trust is undertaking a demand and capacity review that will determine the level of additional resourcing required. That will inform the commissioning for 2018-19. Of course, it will have taken note of the concerns raised.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who is no longer in her place, raised a point about whether there are peaks of demand linked to drug and alcohol-related calls. I am happy to pick that up as a specific action and investigate that further.

As so often when we debate matters of health, my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) brought a much-valued practical experience to the debate. I was particularly struck with her comparison between the one-to-one staffing rate in intensive care and her concern about the number of crews, and how that interplays with the handover at hospital. As she will be aware, a lot of work is happening on hospital ambulance liaison officers and how hospitals deal with ambulances. NHS Improvement and NHS England are looking at that issue specifically in relation to this trust, but again she made a helpful contribution. I know she mentioned that she had spoken to the Secretary of State about the issue.

Mr Hayes: I, my wife and our 17 and 13-year-olds have all been at A&E at Pilgrim Hospital, on two occasions by ambulance in an emergency, so I speak with that knowledge. The Minister will appreciate the problems in rural Lincolnshire; he knows it very well, as he represents a seat just on the border of my own. Will he apply the work he has just described specifically to Lincolnshire and ask for his officials to look at the circumstances in Lincolnshire? It might well apply to other rural places, by the way. We feel particular pressure, as he has acknowledged, and that kind of reappraisal would be welcome in the county.

Stephen Barclay: My right hon. Friend makes a pertinent point. As he mentioned, he is my constituency neighbour and I am very aware of the specific challenges posed by the geography and the road network in Lincolnshire. I am happy to take that specific point forward. It will not surprise him that I have already zeroed in on some of the challenges in Lincolnshire, particularly around United Lincolnshire and Northern Lincolnshire and Goole, how that interplays across the spectrum of primary care, how the patient pathway goes through, the various blockages in the system and how we look at that in a more systemic way.

That issue interplays with a much wider debate, outside the scope of this one, but to give my right hon. Friend one statistic, 43% of beds are occupied by 5% of patients. If we take the average length of stay from 40 to 35, that is the equivalent of 5,000 hospital beds, each at £100,000 per year. We can see how there is an interplay between what we are debating with the ambulance services and the wider Lincolnshire health economy, which is a specific point. I am happy to have further discussions with him on that.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) raised three points about the report on the disproportionate calls, which were pertinent to a conversation I had just this morning about spikes in care homes and what action might be taken. For example, to what extent can we improve GP access into specific care homes in Lincolnshire through Skype, as one of the mitigations of ambulance demand? We are looking at how we assess the return on investment between the cost of ambulances and emergency admissions and what that investment might do if it were put into a more preventative role—care homes, for example.
[Stephen Barclay]

On the specific matter of Sports Direct, which I was not aware of, the hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, which I will be keen to look at with officials—where there are peaks of demand, what is driving those peaks and how to mitigate them. He also mentioned the issue of privatisation from 2009. We are looking at how we take a more holistic view across a landscape and how mutual support from different parts of the system can provide assistance to that. It will not surprise the hon. Gentleman, knowing my views on Brexit, that for all the talk of some of the challenges of Brexit, the opportunities of Brexit should not be missed. I share his desire on that.

There is also the geography point—whether it is the way services elsewhere have been reconfigured or the extent to which there are, for example, centres of excellence to which his constituents are being taken. Is the issue the formal geography or how the operating protocols within that geography have evolved? That, again, is a perfectly valid point and one we can look at on a case-by-case basis.

I know my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness has championed a number of these issues over a period of time. He raised how we can get the ambulance service working together with the other emergency services. I know that is an issue that many police and crime commissioners have also identified, and many within the fire service are keen to ensure that we have a better join-up between the blue-light services.

The hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) raised the issue of hospital handovers. I assure her that daily reviews are currently being undertaken by NHS England and NHS Improvement. Greater transparency and targeted assistance are being provided, and there are also specific initiatives linked to individual hospitals, particularly including the hospital-ambulance liaison officers.

The hon. Lady also mentioned pay. It is worth reminding the House that the pay band that applies to paramedic staff has been increased from band 5 to band 6, so there has been a recognition in the system of the importance of paramedics, alongside an increase—around 30% since 2010—in the number of paramedics. However, we recognise that there is also an increasing demand, and that this service has been under considerable pressure.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): The Minister has skirted around the issue of breaking up EMAS, which I think some areas might quite like. Does he agree that our priority should be having more paramedics and ambulances, not more chief executives and office buildings?

Stephen Barclay: I think most people who observed my questioning during my four years on the Public Accounts Committee will know that organograms and looking at where investment is and how streamlined structures are is extremely important to me.

At the same time, it is important that one does not make a false saving in driving down some of the management costs, so that procurement, IT investment and consultancy spend, for example—some of the big ticket expenditure—is not effectively managed and escalates.

There is a balance to be struck between having good leadership of trusts and, as my hon. Friend alludes to, not drifting into areas where additional hires are created in the back office as opposed to services on the frontline, where I think Members from across the House want to see them.

In terms of the service nationally, a number of actions have been taken. Under Sir Bruce Keogh’s review of the NHS urgent and emergency care system, ambulance services are being transformed into mobile treatment centres, making much greater use of “hear and treat”, which is treating patients over the phone, and “see and treat”, which is treating and discharging patients on the scene. While we have heard of some of the challenges faced by the trust, it is also worth placing on the record that it is one of the best-performing trusts for “hear and treat”, and treats and discharges more than three in 10 patients either on the phone or on scene. There are areas of good practice that, for balance, it is only fair to recognise.

I will conclude, to allow the hon. Member for High Peak time to speak. We recognise that the trust has challenges, and I am very happy to work with the hon. Lady and other colleagues as we move forward to address those. In addition to the increase in pay bands and the increase in numbers, an active plan is under way to tackle some of the challenges we have heard about today, which I hope gives some comfort to the hon. Lady.

6.13 pm

Ruth George: I thank all Members who have spoken from both sides of the House for the constructive way in which they have approached the debate and some of the constructive proposals that have been put forward.

To the Minister, I say I am keen to look at the 111 service and how we can reduce those 1.3 million calls that come from 111 into the 999 service. I think that would be viewed as very helpful across the service.

On the geographical issues that have been mentioned, my constituency is High Peak, which is very rural. Yes, we take ambulances out of area to urgent and specialist areas, but we also get back. Sometimes, in rural areas in particular, such as Lincolnshire, where, as the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) said, 10 or 11 ambulances can be backed up outside a hospital, it can help to organise support on a regional basis. However, I will not go to the line on that.

It all comes down to resources at the end of the day, as we have heard. EMAS has put in more and more paramedics and squeezed the managers—7% of the 8% of the management staff are on the frontline anyway and do frontline shifts. Not only are they managers, but they are also frontline staff, so the managers know exactly the challenges facing the service. I hope we would all agree that that is needed across the NHS.

The debate has shown the pressures on not only the ambulance service but GPs, A&E departments and the NHS as a whole, and I hope the Minister will take that up across the board.

6.15 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Thursday 22 February 2018

[ Dame Cheryl Gillan in the Chair ]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Refugee Children:  
Family Reunion in the UK

1.30 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered reunion for refugee children with family in the UK.

I am grateful to colleagues for joining me this Thursday afternoon to discuss issues affecting some of the most vulnerable people on our planet. I also thank you, Dame Cheryl, for permitting me to make a personal comment before I turn to the main thrust of my speech.

I would like to apologise to this House for the inappropriate words that I used in a speech in Edinburgh at a Labour event to mark Burns night. I unreservedly apologise for the offence caused. I used inappropriate and offensive words, and I was wrong to do so. I will be working to restore my relationship with the communities concerned over the coming months, making a positive change, and to ensure that society is as tolerant and inclusive as it should be. Thank you for letting me make that apology, Dame Cheryl.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. I want to mention the Members who have sponsored and supported this debate: the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden), for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and for North Down (Lady Hermon), my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), my hon. Friends the Members for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) and for Easington (Grahame Morris), the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), my hon. Friends the Members for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and for Hartlepool (Mr Sweeney), the present system is purely bureaucratic and has to be broadened out, so any review should look at that and make the rules a lot simpler and easier. More important is the fact that legal aid has been stopped and offensive words, and I was wrong to do so. I will be working to restore my relationship with the communities concerned over the coming months, making a positive change, and to ensure that society is as tolerant and inclusive as it should be. Thank you for letting me make that apology, Dame Cheryl.

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Hugh Gaffney: My hon. Friend is right.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate, which was long overdue. To follow on from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), the present system is purely bureaucratic and has to be broadened out, so any review should look at that and make the rules a lot simpler and easier. More important is the fact that legal aid has been stopped since 2013. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) agree that that is significant?

Hugh Gaffney: I agree and will ask the Minister about that at the end of my speech.

Many Members across this House will agree that improvements need to be made to the way in which we support refugees and honour our responsibilities to the most vulnerable. I pay tribute to the important speech given yesterday by the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), on how we can provide the support required by those in need. For me, as a
human and an elected representative, the fact that children are still being forced to take life-threatening and dangerous journeys to their families in the United Kingdom is unforgivable and heartbreaking.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that if a child with family in the UK is fleeing war, threats of trafficking or forced marriage, those family members should be able to sponsor them and take them away from those horrors?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes. That is the reason we see these images on TV. These kids do not want to do it; they are running scared and they are walking millions of miles.

The European Union’s Dublin III regulation determines which EU state decides a person’s asylum application. Under the Dublin III regulation, an unaccompanied child who has made an asylum application has the right to have their application transferred to another EU state where they have a relative. It is a way of reuniting children with their families in the United Kingdom, and that is the right thing to do. I note the agreements signed between the French and British Governments to speed up the Dublin III transfers. That seeks to help children reach the safety of their families in the UK, which is welcome and should be a given. They should not have been forced to take those journeys in the first place.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend will remember that the Conservative party used to be known as the party of the family. In autumn 2017, some 52 of its peers and MPs produced “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families” and called for leadership from Government. Does he agree that should apply to child refugees who risk the perilous journey across Europe?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I agree. That is the whole point of what we are trying to achieve.

Many Members will remember the horrific and devastating image of that lifeless little boy, Alan Kurdi. He was a child, three years old, who was found lying down on a beach in Turkey. Why? Because he was attempting to reach Greece. Why? Because he was trying to be part of the European Union. He was trying to reach a safe and secure home. This was in the 21st century; it should shame and disgrace us all.

The decision of the British people in 2016 to leave the European Union is one that I regret, but I respect it none the less. I mention it because we still have a job to do as world leaders. I am an internationalist. The border does not stop at Carlisle for me, and it does not stop at Calais. I do not want us to become little Britain over the coming years, which is why that role is important.

I would like to share a brief story from back home in North Lanarkshire. In 2015, before I became an MP, my friend Angela Feeney and her daughter Maria were at home, drinking a glass of wine and watching the horrific news of the refugee crisis unfold on the TV. Sitting there, they decided to do something; they decided to be good citizens and act. Their original idea was to fill a car with clothes and drive from Wishaw to Calais to make a small contribution to the humanitarian effort. I was then the secretary of the North Lanarkshire Trade Union Council, and the Feeneyes asked me for help and support for collections for their car and covering costs.

Soon after Alan Kurdi was found—the little boy on the beach—the original plan of taking a car load was no longer possible. By the time the news of little Alan had spread, interest was so great that we ended up sending trucks with two full warehouses’ worth of clothes and other necessary things, and thousands of pounds in donations, which were sent to people not just in Calais but around the world. I thank people in Scotland once again for the passion and the commitment that they showed to the Wishaw to Calais appeal.

I have some specific questions for the Minister to answer when she winds up this debate.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate, for taking my intervention before he moves on to his questions, and for his understanding: I have a flight north tonight, so I cannot stay for the whole debate, which is why I cannot give a speech. Does he agree that despite everything he has said so far, we should, where possible, encourage refugee children to have a better environment in their home countries to prevent them even having to consider the dangerous trek into Europe?

Hugh Gaffney: I think that every child wants to stay in their homeland. I was proud to be born and bred in my community, and to become a councillor, because I am proud of my own land. Unfortunately, we have wars in this world, which involve bombs and bullets that those children have to dodge, which is why they run. Those children want to stay in their own homeland, as do their parents, but unfortunately the world that we live in, in 2018, has become so dangerous that those children and their parents must seek safety. I wish that we could sort the world’s peace tomorrow, so that everyone could live on this planet and share it as we should do.

Does the Minister agree that by amending our immigration rules to include an extended definition of family, as defined by Dublin III, we can ensure that our
response to the crisis focuses on our responsibility to protect vulnerable children? Secondly, will she review the current policies on family reunion and commit to updating the House on what action will be taken? Thirdly, what plans do the Government have to reinstate legal aid for refugee family reunion cases? Lastly, does she agree that by taking action we can reunite vulnerable children with family members and stop their abuse by and reliance on smugglers and traffickers?

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I congratulate him on securing this important debate. On the difficulty of the procedures involved in refugee family cases, is he as appalled as I am that legal aid has not been available for such cases since 2012? Does he agree that without legal aid assistance, applicants rarely know what evidence is required, and that such evidence is key to determining refusal of applications and appeals?

**Hugh Gaffney**: Yes. Legal aid is one of the questions to which I would like to hear an answer. It is so important to refugees and families.

We have gathered to discuss how to play our role on the international stage, be good citizens as a country and ensure that we do our part to save lives. As scripture tells us, let us not walk by on the other side. If the Government make the right changes to the immigration rules, we can play a role in reducing the number of dangerous journeys taken by children and—this is key—prevent needless and tragic deaths. We have a moral duty to allow children to apply for family reunification from some of the most dangerous parts of the world. We can and should work to ensure that we create a safe and legal route for vulnerable children to reach the shores of the United Kingdom.

**Dame Cheryl Gillan** (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Members, may I say that rather a large number of Members, may I say that rather a large number of Members have been granted asylum in Britain. The 2016 report already been granted asylum in Britain. The 2016 report on asylum in the United Kingdom does not have the right to come live with an older sibling who has already been granted asylum in Britain. The 2016 report for Ministers, and that such evidence is key to determining refusal of applications and appeals?

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on securing it. I want to speak in the debate on cancer strategy in the main Chamber, so I am grateful to you for calling me early, Dame Cheryl, and I hope you will forgive me for not being able to stay until the end.

I will not repeat the arguments already made, as I want to keep my remarks brief, but we are considering important issues. Refugees who have already been granted asylum in the United Kingdom do not have the right to offer siblings under 18 the opportunity to come to the UK. Many of us in this House—Members from all parties, I believe—think that that makes no sense. I hope that the Minister will consider carefully the points that my hon. Friend has made.

A 16 or 17-year-old trapped in Aleppo should have the right to come live with an older sibling who has already been granted asylum in Britain. The 2016 report by the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration found that such applications are usually rejected out of hand, and that families must appeal or re-submit their applications for such cases. That kind of bureaucratic can be catastrophic for children left in war zones, trapped in conflict areas where they are at risk of barrel bombs, Daesh terror attacks and so on. Many children are being denied the right to basic family life. I put it to hon. Members that that does not chime with the values that we in this Parliament and this country uphold. The rules clearly need to be amended to make it easier for children to find a safe place to be reunited with their loved ones. We already know that in the chaos of a war zone, it is all the more likely that families will be split up or separated.

Another serious concern is the legal aid situation, which was alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. I hope the Minister will give that careful thought. Legal aid has not been available for refugee family reunions since 2012, despite the fact that such cases are usually incredibly complex. Without legal aid, many applicants are left in the dark, not knowing what evidence is needed or how to collate it, so they have little or no chance of effecting family reunion. Surely it is time to reinstate legal aid.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I have a case in my constituency of two refugee brothers who are trying to get their other brother to the UK from a refugee camp in Turkey. They are having to rely on charity, so they are literally shaking buckets to raise enough money to get solicitors. Does my hon. Friend agree that the situation we face in Britain, in which those children have to rely on charity, is disgraceful, and that the Government should step in to rectify that immediately?

**Grahame Morris**: I thank my hon. Friend for that powerful example—there are many others. The current situation, in which these families are denied access to justice, shames us. To deny children and families who have already faced immense risks and challenges the opportunity of family reunion and legal aid is an appalling indictment of the UK Government, and of us all as parliamentarians.

Legal aid, or its absence, has the power to change lives, for the better or for the worse. It has the potential to keep families together under the most trying circumstances. These restrictive rules do not just affect vulnerable people’s lives, but can make the huge difference between safety and security on one hand, and danger, war and risk to life and limb on the other. It is essential that the Minister looks at the matter.

The current situation forces many people trapped in war zones to take repeated risks to cross borders to reach British embassies. We have seen ample pictorial evidence of that. Surely it is in children’s best interests to be reunited with family members and to be given safe and legal routes to effect that family reunion, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill suggested. The rules are most damaging to the most vulnerable people who are left behind in war zones, and to people who have been granted asylum but have to go through the hearbreak and trauma of not being reunited with family members.
I am proud that this country has a terrific record of helping refugees and people who come to our constituencies. Our record of welcoming refugee families and encouraging them to thrive goes back to before the second world war. Lord Dubs is a notable example.

Mr Jim Cunningham: If we take that a step further, when children are allowed to stop here and become teenagers, there is a problem about them getting further education, as I have said many times. This is part of a bigger problem.

Grahame Morris: My hon. Friend makes a fair point: delaying family reunion creates all sorts of other problems. People who arrive on our shores—who are often fleeing persecution—become valued members of our communities and often work in public service, like Lord Dubs. They set up small businesses and take on important roles in the community. They are a real asset in terms of adding value.

We must act to ensure that families can be reunited. Parliament and Government should not remain passive and allow refugee families to remain divided. I welcome my party’s recent announcement that puts the humanity of migrants and the importance of family life at the heart of our immigration policy, and our pledge to follow a humanitarian approach to immigration policy. That is an expression of our very best values as a nation, and a fulfilment of our duties to the international community.

I pleased to say that I am a proud internationalist, but whether someone is an internationalist or not, they have an obligation to fight for a fairer system. I am proud that my party is championing refugees who are threatened by war, and that it is working to give vulnerable people a chance. I hope we can reform the rules, so that child refugees have a proper chance of being reunited with their families.

1.55 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on securing this significant and timely debate and on his excellent speech. I also thank the many constituents who emailed me in the run up to this debate.

The global refugee crisis has displaced a record 65 million people—the entire population of the UK—from their homes; they are fleeing conflict, persecution and the effects of climate change. I am proud that Scotland has a long history of welcoming refugees from all over the world. Over the past two years, communities across Scotland have demonstrated their compassion and understanding as we welcomed more than 2,000 Syrian refugees, many of whom have settled in my constituency.

I will start positively. It is welcome progress that last month, the UK Government announced several new measures to help child refugees in Europe to come to the UK safely and much more quickly. Crucially, they extended the cut-off date for children who are eligible for transfer under the Dubs amendment, and we welcome that—it is something that the Scottish National party has long been calling for. It will ensure that many more lone children, stranded in appalling conditions, can reach the safety of the UK, but more can still be done.

As we sadly leave the EU, the UK will no longer be signed up to the Dublin III regulations, as we have heard, which are a key route for child refugees to reunite with family members elsewhere in Europe. There is a risk that children will have to rely solely on the UK’s far more restrictive immigration rules, which allow them to reunite only with their parents. That forces children to make the dangerous journey to Europe to try to reach their families. According to the International Organisation for Migration, in 2017 alone, more than 3,000 people died by drowning while trying to make the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean, which should be a shame on all of us.

Post Brexit, the UK Government must commit to guaranteeing the same rights for children in Europe as currently exist under the Dublin III regulations. As the UK seeks to clarify its immigration rules, there is an opportunity to amend the UK’s restrictive and unfair refugee laws. The UK allows adult refugees to apply only for their spouses and dependent children under 18 to join them, which means that grandparents, parents, siblings and children above the age of 17 are prevented from coming to the UK to join them in starting a new life. Similarly, child refugees in the UK are not allowed to sponsor their parents to join them here. Families are simply being torn apart.

Additionally, legal aid has not been available for refugee family reunions since 2012, which makes it even more difficult for families to reunite, as other hon. Members have mentioned. A recent study by the Refugee Council and Oxfam found that reuniting refugee families gives them the best chance of living settled and fulfilling lives, but that denying them the chance to restore their family ties condemns them to a future of anguish and guilt.

That report coincides with the launch of the “Families Together” campaign, which calls for changes to the rules on refugee family reunions and has support from many non-governmental organisations. Those NGOs also back the Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) to support the campaign. The Bill will return to Parliament on 16 March for Second Reading, which will undoubtedly give Parliament the chance to debate and address the flaws in the system, and to stop treating refugee family reunion as an immigration issue, rather than a protection issue. I hope that hon. Members across the political divide, and all hon. Members present, will attend the debate and join us on that. I also urge the Minister in the strongest terms to support the Bill.

I call on the Minister to give child refugees in the UK the right to sponsor their close family, and to expand the definition of who qualifies as family, so that young people who have turned 18 and elderly parents can live in safety with their families in the UK. The UK Government must stop thinking in terms of targets, quotas and rules, and start thinking of individuals and families, as we all do in our own lives. It is time to introduce some humanity into the system, so that these families can rebuild their lives together. Helping mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters who have been torn apart, who have lost everything and who have experienced so much pain is simply the right thing to do.
Family Reunion in the UK

Several hon. Members rose—

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I exhort hon. Members to keep their speeches short—less than four minutes, if possible—so that I do not have to impose a time limit.

1.59 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I am delighted that this subject has come up for debate.

Imagine having to say goodbye to your child, or finding yourself suddenly separated from them without knowing what will happen to them, whether anyone will look after them or whether they will find the rest of your family, if you still have one. That is the situation facing parents among the 22 million refugees across the world. Families are fleeing war or persecution, looking for nothing more than safety and somewhere to live together in peace. Recently, I visited the Red Cross in Scotland and met families who came to this country looking for that very peace and sanctuary. They are now living together in Scotland and making a valuable contribution to their communities. However, we know that it is not the same for all families; for many, things have become impossible.

As a nation, we have been moved by photographs such as the one mentioned by the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney)—pictures of children who have lost their lives or been orphaned because of the conflict in Syria. In the Holocaust Memorial Day debate, we heard moving stories from hon. Members about the flight of their families from Nazi persecution and the sanctuary they found here, yet we now face the very same kind of situations, though our humanity was, and why we did not do more.

As we have heard, the EU’s Dublin III regulation determines which EU state decides a person’s asylum application. In 2016, under the regulation’s criteria, 700 children were transferred from other European countries to join family members in the UK, but none of us knows what the situation will be after Brexit. We need the UK Government to improve the system to make it easier for children to find their families. They need to amend the immigration rules on refugee family reunions to make it easier for close family members—siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles—with refugee or humanitarian protection status to sponsor children in their family to join them in the UK. They also need to lessen the conditions that must be met by non-refugee sponsors, and help with legal aid for refugee family reunions.

All parents, especially single parents, know that horrible feeling that can creep up on us in the middle of the night. It hits us when someone in our family dies or when we sit watching the evening news and see pictures of families fleeing, children separated from their parents and empty, hopeless faces staring out of the screen. We think, “Who would look after my child if something happened?” I think about it even though my daughter is now an adult. When I do, I am grateful that I have a family, so there are people who will love and look after her. Surely that is what we all want for our children, and surely we should want our Government to do their best to provide that sanctuary for every child.

2.3 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): There are seven refugee families in Bedford as part of the five-year Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement programme, but Bedford has pledged to take 20. More needs to be done to reunite families, but complex family reunion rules and ineffective implementation are an obstacle to the most vulnerable children reaching the safety of their families. Unaccompanied migrant children are highly vulnerable to trafficking, sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse. We cannot continue to turn a blind eye to their plight.

Some 95% of applicants waiting to join family members in the UK through refugee family reunion are women and children. Children have a right to family life and family unity under the European convention on human rights, but in the UK, there is no right for children to sponsor their parents to join them; child refugees can apply for family reunion only outside the immigration rules. The cost of accessing legal advice puts that outside the reach of too many people in desperate need. Refugee family reunion cases should be brought back within the scope of civil legal aid in England and Wales. Nobody decides to leave their family without good cause. These matters of life and death.

The Select Committee on Home Affairs has criticised the logic that says that a child who has come from one place to which it is unsafe to return cannot bring their parents here, whereas an adult refugee is entitled to bring their children here. These children have fled war, persecution and torture, and have gone through terrible journeys to reach sanctuary in the UK. Surely it is not too much to ask that they be reunited quickly with their families. “Refugees Welcome?”, the brilliant report published by the all-party group on refugees, found that refugee children who are unable to be joined by even their closest relatives really struggle to integrate.

Nobody in this Chamber underestimates the scale of the problem. I am sure we all agree that there are no easy answers, but these children are in dire peril. The Government’s response to the crisis has been modest in comparison with that of other countries. It has been reactive, not proactive, and it simply is not good enough. Last month’s agreement with France to speed up Dublin transfers is welcome, but children should not have to make dangerous journeys to reach their families in the first place. We must allow them safe legal passage, and the ability to apply for family reunification more easily from their country of origin, before we see more shocking pictures of dead children washed up on the beaches of Europe. I hope that we do not have to look back at those horrific pictures in 10 years’ time and wonder where our humanity was, and why we did not do more to help.

2.6 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on his remarks. We are here because we want to uphold human rights, but we must also...
recognise that there are real hurdles and that the system needs to be un-clogged. I trust that the Minister will apply practical common sense today.

Recently, children from Bootham School in York urged me to speak in this debate. One wrote:

“I can’t imagine a world without my little brother. He is 5 years old. He was called names and started crying, so I ran to him. I held him as he cried and told him I loved him. That incident was name calling, not having to flee your home and cross the sea on a tiny boat that may kill you and rip you from your family at the same time. Rachael please don’t let other people’s brothers cry alone. Please help loving families get back together.”

Children really get this agenda, and I trust that we will take it to heart, too. As another child said:

“All these people are just like us and they don’t deserve what has happened to them. They should have the right to live in safety and comfort like us and it is inhumane to deny them this.”

I have heard so many moving stories from children, because families are families the world over. It is so important that we understand the love, concern and need to be together that these families have, too. As another child said,

“some have seen things that no one should ever see, some have experienced things that none of us can imagine”—

first the trauma, then the separation. Things must change.

I have heard so many moving stories from constituents, too. They have described unnecessary delays, bureaucracy and requests going back and forth for completely irrelevant information. For instance, one constituent had to prove his religious faith when it had nothing to do with his case. Another had to produce samples of his DNA and his children’s DNA to prove that he was their father. Of course he was the father, but what about his dignity?

Immigration services have to up their game. We cannot have these delays, because every single delay increases the risk, particularly for young and vulnerable people.

Today I heard from a constituent who is just 17 years old, whose brother is just 14 and is in Sicily, on his own and at risk. We need to be able to resolve these problems quickly and ensure that the wider family can be involved and that older children, who are incredibly vulnerable in this situation, are brought to a place of safety with other family members here in the UK.

Of course, as we have heard, legal aid needs to be extended to address this complex area of law—nothing less will do. We need to fast-track this matter, to ensure that we address these people’s needs.

I also want to raise with the Minister the issue of families once they come to the UK, which I have heard about from constituents in York. One constituent’s children were in Germany, where they had been placed, and he just wanted to be in the same place as them. He did not mind whether they came to the UK or he went to Germany; he just wanted to be in the same place as them. It is really important that we facilitate that.

We also need to make sure that the needs of families are addressed here. I have heard a story of a constituent who had to live with his family of three children, two of whom were teenagers, in a single converted garage in York. The council did not get involved for two months and then said that the garage was unsuitable and moved them to a homeless hostel. That is unacceptable. There was also a family who had to share a room in a house, and all the facilities, with four other occupants. Such overcrowding is unacceptable. We are talking about people who are fragile and broken, and they should not be crushed by our local authorities. The Government must intervene and ensure that no further harm is done.

I am proud that York is the first human rights city in the UK and that we have great support from York City of Sanctuary and Refugee Action York. We must remember, as one child said to me:

“We are all humans and we all deserve to be with our living families, no matter who we are or where we have come from.”

This Government has a responsibility to act. I am sure the Minister has heard these stories today and that she will take action.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. There are still five Members who have indicated that they wish to speak before the Front Benchers, so I exhort you all again to try to keep your remarks to three minutes or so.

2.11 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I will endeavour to be brief, particularly as I hope to speak in the next debate on child poverty in London.

I begin by referring to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. On 4 September last year, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who is present for this debate, and the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), I went with Safe Passage UK to the Calais Jungle camp, or rather what remains of it. I had been there once before, at the very beginning of 2016, when it was in full swing, as it were. Although there are substantially fewer refugees there now, because of the demolition and the behaviour of the French authorities, the conditions are substantially worse, particularly for the hundreds of young people who are there. That is partly because of the violence being shown to them and partly because any recourse to the authorities has been moved hundreds of kilometres away, so that even those who have the right to apply under Dublin III are unable to do so. Of course, that means that there is far more risk of them risking very dangerous ways to reach the UK, such as under lorries or on the rail tracks.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the danger to young people who are in limbo in camps such as Calais is not just physical danger but the danger of their being recruited into crime, drug-taking and in some cases even prostitution?

Andy Slaughter: I absolutely agree. I feel for all the refugees in that situation, but particularly for children and those who have a legal right—whether they are Dubs children or Dublin III children—to be in the UK. Frankly, it is shameful that the Government did not honour their promise to Lord Dubs. Lord Dubs is a constituent of mine and last month I went with him to the Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration here in Westminster—of course, he came to the UK on the Kindertransport—and we met other survivors. I think that he is puzzled, as well as horrified, that we are unable to show to children who are being persecuted abroad now the charity that we showed in much more difficult times in the 1930s.
I will make two specific points. When we returned from that most recent trip to Calais, I asked the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union what would happen if we leave the EU and the Dublin III regulations fall away. I asked him what the Government intend to replace them with, whether they would replicate them in the immigration rules, and whether they would apply—somewhat anomalously—just to the EU27 countries or more generally. I received what I thought was quite a helpful response at the time, which was 5 September last year. We know that the immigration Bill is delayed, but the Secretary of State said that that issue is “precisely the sort of thing that that Bill should address. A more general point I made to the European Commission negotiators...is that a legal requirement is not the only reason for doing things. We are a country with a strong tradition of tolerance and generosity, and if anything, I expect that to grow after we leave, not diminish.”—[Official Report, 5 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 64.]

Some months on, I wonder whether the Minister for Immigration is able to update us today on the Government’s current thinking on that specific issue. In other words, will there be what I think all Members taking part in this debate would like to see, which is an end to anomalies where there are clearly people in this country who can care for children but who are not their parents? They might be their grandparents, uncles or aunts. A very good example is given in the case studies provided to us by the NGOs: despite being a refugee herself, a grandmother is able to be a sponsor but does not have the necessary finances, and there is an uncle who is a British citizen and does have the necessary finances, but so many hoops have to be jumped through in order to achieve a resolution.

I will conclude by repeating what a number of colleagues have said about legal aid. I had the dubious privilege of leading for the Opposition on the Committee considering the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, which stripped out so much of our legal aid system. The LASPO review is going on as we speak and is due to report soon. I wish that the whole of that iniquitous Act could be swept away and that we could go back to there being an entitlement to legal aid, which was then qualified, rather than simply having a very frugal approach of giving legal aid in only a few cases. I am sure that this Government are not going to do that, but I have some hope that they will genuinely review LASPO and correct some anomalies—and this issue is clearly an anomaly.

The people we are talking about cannot use the legal system, because it is complex and, as has been said many times by senior members of the judiciary, simply having the right to go to court is not enough unless someone has the ability to do so as well, and in many cases that means having a lawyer.

2.17 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Family bonds are one of the things that give our lives meaning. My family are the most important people in my life and I do not know what I would do without them, and I am delighted that I also have a new niece or nephew on the way. I know that every hon. Member present feels exactly the same way about their family. Yet there are some people out in the world who, although they share those feelings too, are not able to be with their families today. The sad reality is that far too many people in this world are stranded by war, oppressed by circumstances or persecuted either for what they believe or for who they are. It is no wonder that those people choose to flee such conditions and seek a better life, but the horrific side-effect is that families are torn apart.

I know what I would do in those circumstances: I would do anything to ensure that my children were safe—and yes, that would mean even sending them to a different country. I would want the Government of that country to show some humanity and some compassion, and allow us to be reunited. If hon. Members agree that is what they would do, too, why is it not what we would want for other people?

I am delighted that in Hull there are people who care enough about those in need to roll up their sleeves and volunteer to help refugees who have come to this country. In particular, I am thinking about organisations such as Hull Help for Refugees and Open Doors Hull, which I visited before Christmas. Both organisations do amazing work. However, for all the fantastic work those brilliant organisations do, it is the Government and the Government alone who can extend the rights of reunification so that child refugees can bring their parents to the UK and resume their family life.

I will end by quoting a poem, “Human Family”, by one of my favourite poets, Maya Angelou:

“The variety of our skin tones can confuse, bemuse, delight, brown and pink and beige and purple, tan and blue and white... We love and lose in China, we weep on England’s moors, and laugh and moan in Guinea, and thrive on Spanish shores. We seek success in Finland, are born and die in Maine. In minor ways we differ, in major we’re the same. I note the obvious differences between each sort and type, but we are more alike, my friends, than we are unalike.”

If that is true and if in their situation we too would like to be reunited with our children, then we as Members of Parliament must act to give those who are currently refugees the rights that we ourselves would like, because we are more alike, my friends, than we are unalike.

2.20 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dume Cheryl. This is the biggest humanitarian crisis on record, and the response to that challenge has to meet the severity of the situation in the times in which we live. When a family decides to flee a country because of danger to life, the process is neither simple nor straightforward. During that period of chaotic turmoil, lives are turned upside down and children are often separated from their parents, leaving them in a vulnerable position that no child should be in.

The UK Government’s approach thus far to family reunification is overly complex and bureaucratic, and it keeps families apart. I agree with Refugee Action that refugee family reunion rules should be expanded to...
cover all relationships where the applicants are dependent on the sponsor. In times of war, it is sadly to be expected that when the parents of a family die, the oldest sibling will be responsible for looking after their younger sisters and brothers, but the restrictive UK approach prevents the oldest sibling from being covered by the refugee family reunion rules. The Government may argue that they have immigration rules that may help, but they fail to mention that the system is costly, complex and overly bureaucratic—a hurdle that is far too great for many refugees to overcome. The financial requirements are prohibitive and were made worse by the Tories removing legal aid for family reunion applications back in 2013.

The private Member’s Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar ( Angus Brendan MacNeil) would reintroduce legal aid for those looking to bring their families together. That is not just morally right; it is an absolute moral imperative. The Scottish Government recognise that for refugees, leaving home is not a choice but a necessity to protect them from violence and death. Our recently published “New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy”, which has been endorsed by the UN, sets out how Scotland can continue to help refugees to rebuild their lives. However, our attempts are hampered when families are not allowed to be reunited.

This issue unites the Scottish National party and Labour in Scotland, and I am very proud that my local authority, under both parties, has welcomed 28 Syrian families to Renfrewshire. Kassem Ayash, his wife Hiba and their young daughter Hajar arrived in Paisley in late 2015 from a camp in Jordan, and I am pleased to say that they have since had a son, Abdulraham, born in Scotland. However, Kassem’s mother and father and seven siblings are all still in Jordan, and he is not sure he will ever see them again. He said:

“They are all still there so far away. We miss them very much.”

Speaking with tears in his eyes, Kassem said the welcome he and his family received in Paisley was beyond anything he could have hoped for. He said:

“Someone from the council said to me, ‘If I could change the weather for you, I would.’”

I grant that the weather is not grand. He went on:

“That sentence was enough, that said it all to me…The welcome from everyone has been amazing. Everyone has been so kind and understanding. We have seen no discrimination from anyone, just love and understanding.”

We can and must do better. In a few weeks’ time, we can put our warm words into action. My hon. Friend’s private Member’s Bill is a fantastic opportunity to ensure we help meet the calls made on us as a result of the biggest humanitarian crisis. All we have to do is turn up and vote on 16 March.

2.23 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on securing this debate, and I thank my colleagues for their remarks. The migration crisis is a great test of our values as a nation. It shines a light on the actions, not the words, of our politicians. Britain has much to be proud of in the realm of international development, but when it comes to unaccompanied child refugees, we are being found wanting. It is not an immigration issue; it is an issue of our shared humanity. At the moment, we are not at our best, and we need to be.

The changes to the immigration rules, particularly those affecting unaccompanied child refugees, need to be accelerated. The approach is not working. I welcome the changes announced in the Sandhurst treaty, but since that treaty was signed, how many more children have been brought forward? How much more money and funding has been allocated to supporting these unaccompanied child refugees? Will the Minister reassure us—so many people out there do not know the answer to this—on whether unaccompanied child refugees are included in the immigration targets? We should ensure that young people fleeing conflict and poverty are not counted for political purposes, or for the purposes of an immigration target; that would send the strong message from this House that those young people matter as individuals, not as a statistic.

I was pleased to join my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) in Calais. I saw the shocking conditions those young people were in. I want to know that each and every time we stand up, we move a little closer to improving the lives of those kids. Some of the images I saw and stories I heard still haunt me. A stat from UNICEF shows that a majority of those young people were sexually abused on their way to Calais. That still really angers me. What additional help are we giving to those children whom we are accepting to deal with the sexual assaults and abuse they have suffered on route to the UK?

Plymouth has a fine reputation for welcoming refugees. Students and Refugees Together is a superb example of how open and welcoming we are as a city, but there is still so much more we need to do as a country. I would be grateful if the Minister continued to fight the case within Government, because we need to send a message to our entire nation that these young unaccompanied refugees are not drains on the state. They are part of our shared humanity, and we have a collective responsibility to look after them.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): I thank Members for their forbearance, because I can now get the last speaker on my list in.

2.26 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Images from a terrible war that has been going on for years haunt us daily. Families suffer on an unimaginable scale. We sit in front of our TV screens feeling helpless, but we actually can do something about these things, especially here in Westminster. We can help families escape this horror. To do that, we must change our wrongheaded immigration rules. I welcome this timely debate, which is not just about rebuilding lives, but ultimately saving them. I am sorry I cannot be in Westminster on 16 March.

It makes no sense that under immigration laws, children alone in the UK have no right to be reunited with even their closest family members, unlike adult refugees. If we allow children refugee status in the UK, we have accepted that it is too dangerous for them to return home. Should they never see their loved ones again? Are we condemning their families to face daily threats to their lives, while their children risk becoming orphans?
These children have already been through enough, and it is not for us to punish them further. Being reunited with their family is surely the best way for them to rebuild their life. Not reuniting them is cruel, and means they will become increasingly vulnerable in the UK.

The Government’s response so far has been absurd. They say that changing the rules would create a perverse incentive to encourage children to leave their families and risk hazardous journeys to the UK. That is astonishing. We are not talking about a nice holiday trip across the Mediterranean; we are talking about escaping grave danger. The Government’s obsession with cutting immigration is stopping us from responding as human beings and being compassionate. Helping refugees is the right thing to do.

The rules of family reunions for those given refugee status are incredibly complex, and the obstacles to evidencing a family link when that family has been torn apart due to conflict can be impossible to overcome. The problems are often multiplied by language barriers. The fact that there is little legal aid means that these people struggle to rebuild their lives.

I grew up in Germany—my country of origin—under an immense feeling of guilt at what the country had inflicted on the rest of the world. Germany has taken in more than 1 million Syrian refugees. That is not as some form of redemption, but because it is a changed country. Britain, my country of choice, has a proud tradition of being a sanctuary for those who are persecuted. Let us remember our obligations.

2.29 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Thank you, Dame Cheryl, for chairing today’s debate so astutely, so we could hear so many powerful and thoughtful speeches. I pay a warm tribute to the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) for introducing the debate, for his powerful advocacy on the issue, and for securing such an amazing turnout. I emphasise that on Friday 16 March we have a significant opportunity to change the rules on family reunion and legal aid for family reunion applications. If as many hon. Members as possible could put that date in their diary, that would be greatly appreciated.

It is good to debate this important issue again; it must be the third or fourth time we have debated it in the last couple of years, which illustrates the strength of feeling among hon. Members and their discontent with the rules. That discontent essentially falls into two parts: first, discontent about the difficulties that families face in going through with a family reunion, even when people qualify under the rules; and secondly, discontent about the rules being drawn too tightly.

Before I touch on each of those aspects, it is important to recall how important family reunion is. It is important that people applying to come here can be reunited with family members, because very often that provides a safe, legal route to a place of safety—a route that would not otherwise exist. It is also vital for the family members who are here already. Their lives can be made unbearable, as hon. Members have attested, and their integration can be made much more difficult by separation from, and the suffering of, their loved ones who are unable to join them here.

Family reunion helps to achieve the aim, which I think we in this Chamber all share, of reducing the number of dauntless journeys that have to be made. It also undermines the people smugglers’ business model. After all, which people are most likely to do anything open to them—to move heaven and earth—to get to the UK? People in dangerous or difficult situations who have a reason to be here in the form of family. If there is no safe, legal route, people with family in the UK will be the most likely to turn to the people traffickers.

I turn to the first issue that I outlined: the procedures for those who are fortunate enough to qualify. As I will show, the requirements can be complex, and it is not straightforward for a person to prove that they meet them, as the Red Cross explained in an excellent report. Even proving what would seem a very simple part of the rules, such as two people’s relationship, is sometimes not easy. In the case of children, we instinctively think of a birth certificate, but what if someone is from, say, Eritrea? How do the UK Government form a view on whether to give such documents evidential weight? Will they need an expert report on the authenticity of a birth certificate? Should we get a DNA test? What if the child is adopted or is a stepchild? All that is without even thinking about language and cultural barriers, never mind levels of education.

I used to be an immigration solicitor, and had the fortune to assist a number of families with such applications. It was always clear as day to me that legal aid to provide that advice was appropriate. I am glad that it is still available in Scotland for family reunion applications; it should be available in the rest of the United Kingdom, given how important and difficult these issues are.

Turning to the various rules that apply to children seeking to be reunited here, part 11 of the immigration rules allows for pre-flight children who are under 18 to obtain refugee family reunion with parents here. It is a solid enough starting point, but even here there are some questions. For example, why should a 17-year-old who moved out of the family house to go and study, just months before his family fled, be excluded from the scope of the rules? Much more fundamentally, why draw the line at 18? Everyone here would be horrified to be told that their 18-year-old had to be left behind, while their 15 and 17-year-old siblings were able to come to the United Kingdom. A more generous option would, of course, be to make the provision available for those up to the age of 21 or 25, or we could apply a test of whether the adult child was still part of the household, and/or a dependent. There are different perspectives, but unfortunately, again, UK immigration rules seem to take one of the most restrictive options possible.

If someone does not qualify under the general family reunion rules, they look to part 8 of the immigration rules, where there are alternatives for children. Here is probably where we find some of the greatest injustices. For children seeking to join other relatives, such as siblings or uncles and aunts, the tests are infinitely more difficult. They must prove not just their relationship, but serious and compelling family or other considerations which make exclusion of the child undesirable. Crucially, the sponsor must also be able to prove an ability to maintain and accommodate the child without recourse to public funds.
Hon. Members will all have had—some spoke about this—new refugees at their surgeries. An example would be a Somali couple, who have been here just a few months with younger teenage children. They may be making good attempts to integrate and learn English, but may be hindered by the distress of separation from a niece or sister who they fear for and believe is vulnerable without other family support. The idea that they will be able to meet all those financial tests so that their sister or niece can arrive here is ridiculous.

If there are serious and compelling considerations that make exclusion of a child undesirable—itself a tough test—surely in no circumstances should there be an additional financial test. That test can force families into horrible choices. What if the family has enough financial resources or accommodation to meet the tests in relation to one child, but not a second? Just this morning, I heard of a family forced to make such a horrendous decision. They could pick one child, but not both; otherwise, the financial and accommodation tests would not be met.

Injustice is served not only to kids seeking to join relatives other than their parents, but to adult children seeking to join their parents. Those 18 and 19-year-old kids have to meet some even more fiendishly challenging legal tests: they have to show that they are in not “exceptional compassionate circumstances”, but “the most exceptional compassionate circumstances”. Think about a 19-year-old daughter living alone in a refugee camp in Kenya. Today, those are hardly exceptional circumstances, never mind the most exceptional, but I think most people in the Chamber would think that she should qualify for family reunion. How many of us could honestly say that if we were in the position of the Somali couple to whom I referred, we would not be tempted to resort to the people smugglers, if that was the only route by which we could get our daughter to the United Kingdom? Government policy is, in essence, in danger of driving parents to make those decisions.

The same maintenance and accommodation requirements risk an even more horrendous situation. Imagine that a 19-year-old in a refugee camp has been seriously harmed. How can it be that we might end up with a decision that says, “I acknowledge that you are living alone in the most exceptional compassionate circumstances, but we’re still not going to let you in, because you aren’t earning enough money yet to meet the financial thresholds”?! That would be an incredible injustice.

Families are left to make an application to the entry clearance officer outside the rules, desperately hoping that he or she will exercise discretion and allow that 19-year-old in anyway. The Government say that this is the answer to the problem, but there were only 21 cases in 2015 and 49 in 2016 where such applications were successful. In the circumstances we face, those are worryingly low numbers. If the rules are complex, the guidance on how to exercise discretion, which again requires exceptional circumstances and recognises that grants will be rare, is even more so. We also have to acknowledge that those successful in applications outside the rules will be granted much more restrictive rights than if they had been successful under the rules.

If there were time, I would also criticise rules on post-flight children, which are restrictive as well. I join other Members in criticising the intransigence of the Government in refusing to allow refugee children who are here to sponsor their parents to come here, a situation that the Home Affairs Committee has described as “perverse”. The Government’s argument that it would create a pull factor is not based on any evidence, and is horrendously unethical. At the end of the day, we need to do what is just and fair. The idea that we should treat people—children in this case—unfairly simply to disinterest other people, including children, from seeking asylum in our country is pretty outrageous.

I hope that the Minister is listening to the arguments that have been powerfully made by hon. Members from across the House. If not, I hope that hon. Members will join us on Friday 16 March in ensuring that progressive change is made to the UK’s family reunion rules.

2.38 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) for securing today’s debate and for his excellent speech. There have been many great contributions this afternoon, so I will not name any hon. Members, but simply thank them all for enriching the debate.

At the moment, unaccompanied children who have been granted refugee status do not have the right to sponsor their family members to join them. We are one of the few countries in Europe with that policy. Adult refugees can be joined only by their spouse or partner and dependent children under 18. That means that they cannot bring siblings, parents, aunts or uncles.

In her speech yesterday, Labour’s shadow Home Secretary announced our policy on family reunion. Under a Labour Government, if a child has been granted the right to be here, so will their parents or carers. If they have been brought up by carers or parents with a right to be here, they will also have that right, even after they turn 18. That will allow child refugees to be reunited with their families, and will end the awful practice of children who have spent their childhood and adolescence in the UK being deported at the age of 18 to countries that they often know nothing about, and with which they have no affinity. I will make the positive argument that family reunion promotes integration, and then refute the Government’s false claim that this policy will act as a pull factor.

Separation from family members is a real barrier to integration. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says: “there is a direct link between family reunion, mental health and successful integration.”

The first thing that many migrants say when they are granted status is, “How do I bring my family?” That can lead to spending enormous amounts of money and effort in attempting to bring family members here, even when that is impossible under the immigration rules.

Samira is a refugee who has been in contact with the Refugee Council. She is a mother from central Africa who has been resettled in the UK with two of her children, but separated from her daughter and grandchildren.
She sent every bit of money she had to her family and lived in poverty. Many refugees are unable to focus on taking steps to integrate because of worry about family members and feelings of guilt.

One refugee, Mwanza, described to the Refugee Council going to English language classes and taking nothing in, because of the worry about his wife and daughter, who are still in a refugee camp in central Africa. Mwanza’s difficulty in English classes affected his ability not only to integrate, but to support his family, as English is essential for finding employment.

Integration is already a real challenge for refugee children coming to the UK, and separation from their families makes it much harder. On the other hand, when refugees, especially children, are reunited with family members, that accelerates integration, both for the new arrivals and for family members already in the UK.

The Government’s reason for not doing more to reunite refugee families in the UK has been that they do not want to create a pull factor that encourages unaccompanied children to make dangerous journeys to the UK. We reject that argument completely, for two reasons. First, it fundamentally misunderstands the causes of migration flows. People do not leave their families and take dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean and Europe, with all the associated risks, because of the welfare benefits of the UK. Apart from anything, many refugees arrive with a misunderstanding of our refugee system. Push factors on migrants far outweigh any other issue. So long as there is war, fear of persecution and conflict, people will be forced to flee their homes.

Secondly, a lack of legal routes to resettlement actually encourages people to make dangerous journeys. Legal schemes disrupt the activities of people traffickers, rather than encourage them. Where legal routes are limited, where children lose faith in systems and trust in officials, they turn to people traffickers or smugglers, who exploit them.

Omar has been granted refugee status in the UK after fleeing Syria. His brother is 17 years old and is in danger of being forcibly recruited into the army. The rules on refugee family reunion do not allow Omar to sponsor his brother, so he is forced to explore the possibility of helping his brother to make the dangerous journey to Europe. Once Khaled arrived in Europe, he would be able to ask for his case to be transferred to the UK under the Dublin III regulations. They would both rather avoid a treacherous journey across the Mediterranean, but without a legal route, they have no other option.

It is clear that extending family reunion rules is in the interests of refugees and society as a whole. Labour promotes a fair, managed migration system that honours our humanitarian obligations. We support the family reunification Bill that will come before the House on 16 March. We want to allow refugees to settle, integrate and live fulfilling lives in the UK, and to avoid the perverse situation where children who have close family in danger abroad cannot be reunited with them, and are brought up instead in our care system.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, it might be helpful for her to know that the mover of the debate has indicated that he would like a couple of minutes at the end to wind up.

2.44 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Thank you, Dame Cheryl. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on securing this debate and I reassure him I will certainly leave him a couple of minutes at the end.

I start by thanking everyone here today who has contributed with thought-provoking and compassionate contributions. I have listened carefully to the many accounts of how important it has been for refugees in Members’ own constituencies to have their family members join them, to support their wellbeing and their integration into society. Like other Front-Bench spokespeople, I will not pick out individual contributions at length as I am conscious that I am very short on time, but I would reassure hon. Members that during the past five weeks or so that I have been in this role, I have taken the time to meet representatives from charities in my own constituency and nationally. I was particularly moved to meet Lana and Yameena, two Southampton University students. Lana had very specific experience of refugees when she was living in France and her family had welcomed a number of young refugees into her home. She was very clear to describe them to me as her brothers.

I assure the House that we are listening to the concerns about refugee family reunion. I know from my early discussions with non-governmental organisations and international organisations the importance placed on the issues, and that has been reinforced during our debate today. They are also issues my predecessor discussed on many occasions with NGOs, in the context of our wider asylum and resettlement strategy. I look forward to continuing that important work.

Several colleagues have focused on the question of extending the family reunion criteria, which is the subject of Baroness Hamwee’s private Member’s Bill and of the private Member’s Bill from the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—if the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) can be nervous about the pronunciation of that, he can probably imagine how I feel—which was introduced earlier this week and is due to come before this House for Second Reading on 16 March.

The Government’s policy objective for refugee family reunion remains to ensure that we are able to bring together pre-flight families and dependents who are in precarious or compelling circumstances. We must ensure that our policies support those who need our protection who cannot remain in their country or region of origin. I would therefore ask hon. Members to reflect on the policy objective of the private Member’s Bill, because the proposals, as currently drafted, would go far beyond that. It could lead to the policy being used by significantly more people who have no protection needs or who are not necessarily in precarious positions.

The Government strongly support the principle of family unity and we have a comprehensive approach to refugee family reunion set out in the immigration rules and our family reunion policy. Our starting point is that family reunion is a matter for immigration rules and policy, rather than primary legislation. Many hon. Members have highlighted that the family reunion rules provide only for immediate family members of refugees, but the immigration rules and resettlement schemes provide...
for extended family members to join their family here, if they are in the most precarious and dangerous circumstances.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister is right to highlight that there are other routes available to different family members, but will she comment on the maintenance and accommodation test? Even if an applicant can show that they are living in the most compelling compassionate circumstances, that application could still be rejected because the sponsor in the United Kingdom does not meet a certain financial or accommodation threshold. Surely that is an unjust way to go about things.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that with me. That is one of the points that I will take away with me from today’s debate.

We provide for British citizens to sponsor family members, there is provision to grant visas outside the rules in exceptional cases, and the mandate refugee scheme enables those recognised by the UNHCR as refugees to join close family members here in the UK.

I have noted the concerns raised today that so-called family reunification under the Dublin regulations may no longer be available post Brexit. However, Dublin does not confer immigration status simply because an individual has a family member in the UK. It is a mechanism for deciding the member state responsible for considering an asylum claim. It is for those seeking asylum and not those granted refugee status.

Having said that I was not going to pick up particular points, I would like to pick up on those made by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who raised the Sandhurst treaty. Many Members have referenced Dublin III and the Dubs scheme. I was fortunate in 2015-16 to be a member of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe with Alf Dubs—he insisted that I call him Alf at all times, so I apologise if I refer to him incorrectly today. Travelling abroad with Lord Dubs was an incredibly instructive experience. The Sandhurst treaty was signed very soon after I came into this role—I think within the first two weeks.

I reassure the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport that we have committed £3.6 million to enable us to strengthen our co-operation with France on the operation of the Dublin regulation and the development fund, and to work with it to identify projects that support genuine claims through the Dublin process. A significant part of the Sandhurst treaty was about looking at the whole route for refugees. It is crucially important that we do not look at it in isolation either in the middle east and north Africa region or in Calais. We have to look at the entire journey that individuals make.

On the 480 children that will be accepted under Dubs—the number was at 220 when I came into this role—we are determined to ensure that, by changing the date and working closely with Greece and Italy, we fulfill that requirement. I regard it to be an absolute priority to take the 480 young people we have committed to.

Anyone transferred under the Dublin regulation will be expected to leave the UK if they are found not to need protection. Our family reunion rules will continue to enable immediate family members to reunite with their loved ones in the UK safely, regardless of the country in which they are based.

Pretty much every hon. Member raised legal aid and the cost of legal representation for family reunion cases. On 30 October, the Lord Chancellor announced the start of a review of legal aid reforms, which will include an assessment of the changes to the scope of legal aid for immigration cases, and will report later this year. Although family reunion cases generally do not fall within the scope of the legal aid scheme, exceptional case funding may be made available where it is legally required. We are committed to providing clear guidance and application forms to support applicants through the family reunion process, and are working with key partners such as the British Red Cross and UNICEF to improve the process for considering family reunion applications.

It is vital that our focus remains on those most in need of our protection—particularly those fleeing conflict. The Government have invested significantly in supporting the most vulnerable refugees through our resettlement programmes, which offer safe and legal routes to protection and are designed to keep families together. By 2020, we will have resettled 20,000 refugees from Syria. We announced this week that we are at the halfway point, so 10,000 vulnerable families have been resettled in this country and a further 3,000 children and families have been resettled from the wider MENA region. Last year, we provided 6,212 people with protection under all our resettlement schemes. Over the past five years we have issued 24,700 family reunion visas, and since 2010 we have provided 49,830 people with protection status in the UK—they are entitled to apply for their qualifying members to join them.

I believe that our comprehensive approach to refugee family reunion already caters for the types of case that hon. Members are concerned about and provides safe and legal routes for families to reunite here. However, we need to concentrate our efforts on ensuring that our existing resettlement schemes are used to full effect, and that the current rules work properly and effectively. In that way, we will continue to help those who need it most.

I have already met representatives from UNICEF and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. I thank the Refugee Council for sending me the report “Safe but Not Settled”, which looks at how the separation affects their successful integration into their new life in the UK. I look forward to further meetings with representatives of the Refugee Council, the Red Cross and other non-governmental organisations to discuss the important issue of family reunion in the coming weeks.

I therefore ask hon. Members from both sides of the House and representatives of NGOs to continue working with the Government to build on the existing family reunion policy and process to make our resettlement schemes and immigration rules work in the most effective way. In that way, we can ensure that more families are reunited as quickly, legally and safely as possible.

2.54 pm

Hugh Gaffney: I thank all colleagues who attended and spoke this afternoon. The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) came in late, but he has made a contribution to this debate.
Our obligation to the poorest and most vulnerable in the world was highlighted today in some powerful speeches. We heard some very powerful words, such as “humanity” and “human rights”, and my colleagues made some important contributions. I thank them all for that. I asked the Minister a set of clear questions, and I shall be following them up. I was not fully satisfied with her answers—particularly on legal aid. The questions were all perfectly acceptable and should be answered positively not just with words but with actions.

I look forward to working with all colleagues over the coming months. I will attend the debate on 16 March, and I will continue to help and support people. I will not walk on the other side of the road; I will walk on the side of humanity. There should not be a political divide. I am disappointed that there are some empty chairs here, but I respect the fact that it is Thursday afternoon and people have other places to get to.

I came to this House to change society. Since I was a child, I have been looking for world peace. That is the answer: world peace. It is not going to happen tomorrow. All I ask is that, if any child needs a hand to reach out to, we should offer that helping hand. Do not do it for me: let us remember Alan Kurdi.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): This has been an excellent debate, and I thank you all for your forbearance. We have managed to get all speakers in in very good time, so you are all to be congratulated. This was a first-rate debate, and my colleagues made some important contributions. I thank them all for that. I asked the Minister a set of clear questions, and I shall be following them up. I was not fully satisfied with her answers—particularly on legal aid. The questions were all perfectly acceptable and should be answered positively not just with words but with actions.

I look forward to working with all colleagues over the coming months. I will attend the debate on 16 March, and I will continue to help and support people. I will not walk on the other side of the road; I will walk on the side of humanity. There should not be a political divide. I am disappointed that there are some empty chairs here, but I respect the fact that it is Thursday afternoon and people have other places to get to.

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Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): This has been an excellent debate, and I thank you all for your forbearance. We have managed to get all speakers in in very good time, so you are all to be congratulated. This was a deeply emotional, very significant debate on the future of children.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered reunion for refugee children with family in the UK.

Child Poverty: London

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered child poverty in London.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate on such an incredibly important issue.

“We will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.”

That was the promise made outside No. 10 following the appointment of the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) as Prime Minister in July 2016. Less than five months later, the Government’s Child Poverty Unit was axed.

Last month, I received the incredibly saddening news from the End Child Poverty coalition that a staggering 32% of the children in my constituency of Mitcham and Morden are living in poverty. They are 8,598 of the 700,000 children across our capital who are living below the poverty line, defined as the minimum acceptable standard of living. Those children, through no fault of their own or of their family, do not have a warm winter coat, cannot afford to go on some school trips, and are denied the basic ability to have friends over for tea.

Today’s debate gives me the opportunity to tell hon. Members about the reality behind the child poverty statistics. I am worried that the Government do not take the plight of child poverty seriously enough. One in 10 London families has relied on a food bank. Some 88,410 London children are living in temporary accommodation, which is often poor quality and far from their schools and friends, without a place they can call home. A childhood in poverty often leads to an adulthood in poverty and a shorter, less fruitful life. Work is no longer the best route out of poverty, given the current benefit system. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely than not to be born into and grow up in poverty. Consider that for a moment—half of children in London are growing up in poverty. Consider that for a moment—half of children in London are growing up in poverty. Consider that for a moment—half of children in London are growing up in poverty.

It is time for Parliament to understand just what causes poverty, and the tangible actions that the Government have the power to enact to make UK child poverty a thing of the past.

Sir Henry Bellingham in the Chair

Across the capital, London’s children are more likely to grow up in poverty than their contemporaries elsewhere in the UK. Child Poverty Action Group and others have shown that there are as many poor children in London as in all of Scotland and Wales. In some constituencies in London more than half of children are growing up in poverty. Consider that for a moment—there are places in this country where people are more likely than not to be born into and grow up in poverty. To put such a postcode lottery into context, compare that with the most affluent constituencies where only one in 10 children grow up in poverty.

In fact, of the 25 constituencies with the highest levels of poverty, nine are in our capital: Bethnal Green and Bow, Poplar and Limehouse, Edmonton, Westminster North, East Ham, Holborn and St Pancras, Hackney South and Shoreditch, Tottenham, and West Ham. Some of the biggest increases in child poverty have been in those areas already facing the greatest deprivation. Twenty-eight per cent. of children living in poverty in London are materially deprived, meaning that on the
Siobhain McDonagh: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention and for all his work on poverty and helping poor families in London, in particular in his constituency. I completely agree that the delay in universal credit, the difficulties in claiming and the lack of face-to-face contact to be able to resolve some of the problems will have dire impacts on people.

Those examples I gave from Mrs Sheridan’s letter are just some of the examples of child poverty from just one school in just one constituency in our capital, across which four in 10 children now live in poverty—an astonishing figure that is expected to rise. London, however, is a divided city and significant affluence and poverty exist side by side, sometimes on the same street.

Take the London Borough of Merton, where my constituency neighbours the more wealthy constituency of Wimbledon. When we compare child poverty in our borough, it proves to be a sombre metaphor for the story of rich and poor across our capital. There are almost triple the number of children in poverty in my constituency than in Wimbledon and, to be clear, that is not because my constituents are less deserving or work less hard. At local ward level, Cricket Green ward in Mitcham and Morden has a staggering 38% of children in poverty, while less than a five-minute drive away, in the same borough, Wimbledon’s Hillside ward has only 5.5% of children in poverty. Furthermore, Mrs Sheridan, the Malmesbury headteacher, noted a distressing observation she had made: children from her school are significantly smaller physically than their peers in Wimbledon schools.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with me that, as Save the Children found out, in almost half the families living in poverty the youngest child is under the age of five? Is it not therefore crucial that the Government target help on low-income families in the early years?

Siobhain McDonagh: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I ask the Minister what the Government will do to ensure equality of opportunity for all children in our capital, so that the letters of their postcode will not be the determining factor in their lives, dictating how long they live and their quality of life. Almost half of families in poverty are those whose youngest child is under the age of five, the point my hon. Friend just made, so what will the Government do to provide support for low-income families in the early years? How will we ever plug the gap that the absence of Sure Start centres has left?

For the 8,598 children living in poverty in my constituency, the consequences will be lifelong: children who start behind stay behind, harming their prospects throughout life, and harming us all as a society. At birth, they are more likely to have a low birth weight. By primary school, half of all disadvantaged children begin without reaching a good level of early development, compared with the national average of only one third of children. By GCSE, in terms of the numbers achieving at least five A*-C grades, there is a gap of 28% between children receiving free school meals and their more affluent peers.
Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful and compelling speech. Her constituency is not dissimilar to mine. When we think of child poverty, we think of Dickensian cobbled streets and of it as some sort of inner-city malady, but we both represent suburban seats. In Ealing Central and Acton 7,179 children live in poverty, which is not a dissimilar figure to the one she quoted. We also hear about Victorian diseases such as tuberculosis making a comeback. Those places were built to fulfil the suburban dream to get away from the inner city, but the horrible scourge of child poverty is coming to our suburbs. Does she agree with me?

Siobhain McDonagh: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There are great similarities. Suburban London is not the suburban London that many of us think exists.

By the end of their lives, boys from poorer backgrounds have a life expectancy that is an astonishing 9.2 years shorter than that of their wealthier counterparts. Take my borough, Merton, where Wimbledon constituents have a life expectancy almost three years longer than those in Mitcham and Morden, despite a mere letter change in their postcode. The Government, I know, are extremely fiscally responsible so, if that is not enough to inspire the Minister to action, perhaps it is worth them considering that child poverty costs the UK economy a staggering £29 billion per year in services and wasted potential.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a typically powerful speech and has done us a great service in highlighting such an important issue. She is absolutely right to highlight the economic cost of child poverty, but I think that collectively we agree it is also a moral issue. Does she agree with me that what gets measured gets done? Does she also agree that if we are serious about reducing unacceptably high levels of child poverty in our country, we need a target for reduction? Any Government of whatever political colour who are not prepared to commit to such a target will struggle to be taken seriously on the issue of child poverty.

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I commend him for all the work that he does on child poverty. We might not all like targets, but they work.

The fundamental factor explaining London’s disproportionately high child poverty rates is the soaring cost and extreme shortage of housing. Across our capital there is a homelessness crisis, with 54,660 households in temporary accommodation, a figure that makes up 69% of the national total. Some 2,730 of those households are in temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation, including 500 households with children who have been in B&Bs in London for longer than the six-week legal limit.

In my constituency I discovered a converted warehouse in the heart of one of south London’s busiest industrial estates. Connect House temporarily houses up to 86 homeless families with a car park as a playground and rooms so small that families sleep horizontally to all fit in a bed. Families have been placed there from across London, causing children to fall ill, miss school, and even to be found wandering lost around a working industrial estate at night. That is Dickensian, a disaster waiting to happen, and the reality of 21st-century child poverty in London.

The private rented sector—from the earlier point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes)—is where children in poverty are most likely to live, with child poverty in private rents tripling in the past decade alone. That is unsurprising considering that the lowest quartile of rents in London are more than 150% higher than elsewhere in England. That means the average tenant in the capital spends a staggering half of their salary on rent. At my most recent advice surgery on Friday I met John, a married man in his 50s who spends 74% of his monthly income to fund the roof over his head: a one-bedroom flat that he shares with his wife and 11-year-old son. Can the Minister tell me how someone like John will ever be able to afford to save to own his own home, or how work provides John with a route out of poverty?

So what can be done about housing? Since 1939 the delivery of more than 200,000 homes a year in England has happened only in years when there have been major public sector house building programmes, and the last time that the Government target of 300,000 homes were built in one year in England was in 1969, when councils and housing associations were also building new homes. We urgently need to grant local authorities the right to build and the right to buy so that housing can be let to families on low incomes at social housing rents.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Her point on housing is extremely well made. Does she share my concern that some of the regeneration of estates in London is reducing the amount of social housing and that the opportunity to improve and increase social housing is simply not being taken in estate after estate across London?

Siobhain McDonagh: I have a slightly different and perhaps more controversial view of redevelopments. I congratulate councils that try to deal with problems in difficult circumstances and come up with solutions that would not always be their first choice. In life, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, the way to make friends is to do nothing. Sometimes doing something makes you more enemies. I congratulate all the councils of whatever persuasion that are trying to do their best in really difficult circumstances.

A mechanism should be introduced so that any public sector site up for disposal has to be considered for the construction of social or mixed housing, including a substantial proportion that is social. Currently, public bodies tend to sell sites to raise money, not to provide homes. They often hide behind the requirement to obtain best value. For me and many Members here today, best value is the provision of homes for homeless or overcrowded families. How about building on the 19,334 hectares of unbuilt greenbelt land within a 10-minute walk of a London train station? It is not traditional greenbelt land. At no environmental cost, it is enough space for almost 1 million new homes in our capital.

It is not only extortionate housing costs that London faces, but living costs higher than anywhere else in England. In fact, nearly 40% of Londoners have an
income below the amount needed to achieve a basic decent standard of living, with children the most likely to live below minimum income standards.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on all the work that she has done on poverty and housing in London and nationally. Does she agree that the distinction between social and affordable housing is crucial to addressing the problem of housing for those living in poverty? In the previous Budget there was no mention whatever of social housing. Affordable housing in London is very often not affordable. If the Government are to do anything about these issues, they need to grasp this distinction, which they either do not understand or deliberately do not want to address.

Siobhain McDonagh: I am sure that as politicians we often live by our word, and I am extremely offended by the way we now use the word “affordable”. In housing terms, “affordable” means 80% of market rent. I suspect many of us here today could not manage to pay an affordable rent, let alone somebody on a low or median income in the capital. I would be grateful to find a way to ban the word “affordable” in this context.

Sir Edward Davey: Again, the hon. Lady makes a powerful point, along with her right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan). My wife is a social housing lawyer and she has a presentation on the meaning of “affordable” in Government policy and law. She has found 11 different definitions of affordability, so not only is it confusing—“affordable” often does not mean affordable—but it is completely absurd and we need to get back to the issue of social housing that the hon. Lady raised.

Siobhain McDonagh: I wish to say this tactfully because I like the right hon. Gentleman a great deal. The problem and the definition of affordability at 80% market value goes back to the 2010 coalition Government. I do not wish to be mean; I simply wish to put that on the record.

Joan Ryan: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. I do not think it is a question of being mean. It is a question of holding to account, and there simply is not enough holding to account of either the previous coalition Government and their Cabinet members or the current Government. If there was more holding to account, we would not be facing the dire circumstances in which many thousands of children are paying the price for those two Governments not being accountable and not addressing the issues that matter.

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank my right hon. Friend for her intervention.

Across the capital, wages have not kept up with the cost of living and in most parts of London a full-time minimum wage job barely covers the rent. While the cost of living continues to soar, state support for low-income families continues to fall in real terms. The extraordinary cost of living has left one in 10 London families—could barely believe that figure—to rely on a food bank, with three-day emergency food supplies provided to 169,896 people in London since April 2016.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. She mentions families; does she agree that there is a particular problem for single-parent families? According to the charity Gingerbread, 47% of them live in relative poverty. That is the household type that has been hit hardest by welfare reform. It needs a particular kind of support, such as with childcare.

Siobhain McDonagh: It is as if my hon. Friend anticipates what I am going to say. I thank him for his intervention and apologise for speaking for so long; I did not anticipate that so many would want to take part in the debate. I shall try to truncate my remarks as I do not want to take away the opportunity for others to speak.

For many children in poverty, a free school lunch may be the only healthy cooked meal of the day. The Department for Education found that it can lead to positive improvements in attainment and social cohesion, and can also act as a passport to other support such as help with school clothing, trips or extracurricular activities. It is stunning therefore that the Children’s Society estimates that about a million children living in poverty will miss out on free school meals under the Government’s latest proposals to introduce an earnings threshold for eligibility under universal credit. As many of us know, the roll-out of universal credit has countless problems, but completing its roll-out under existing legislation, under which all claimants are eligible for free school meals, would cost approximately £500 million—a fraction of the £29 billion cost of child poverty.

As for childcare costs, a close friend of mine recently had a baby and now, to go to work, she pays £1,000 a month in childcare for her very young child. That is like paying an additional rent every month, just to get access to childcare. She is not alone. Gingerbread reports that some single parents will spend more than half their income on childcare costs so that they can go to work. No wonder 51% of single-parent families in London live in relative poverty. The day-to-day reality means that one in 10 working single parents has had to rely on payday lenders, doorstep lenders and foodbanks. It is that group that makes up half of households in temporary accommodation, whose work in zero-hours contracts has increased tenfold over the past decade, and which is set to lose around 15% of its net income by 2021-22 as a result of this Government’s tax and benefit reforms. How will those reforms ever enable those families to escape poverty?

What about families in London who have a child with a disability? The annual cost of bringing up a disabled child is three times more than that of bringing up a non-disabled child. That results in a staggering 60% of children and young people with learning disabilities and mental ill health living in poverty. In fact, according to a survey in 2012, 17% of families with disabled children go without food; 21% go without heating; 26% go without specialist equipment or adaptations; and 86% go without leisure activity. Does the Minister agree with me that a child with a disability should be no more predisposed to childhood poverty than any other child?

I will end my remarks there to allow others to take part in the discussion. I have many suggestions for solutions that I hope will come up during the debate.
3.23 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for requesting the debate, which is something I supported.

Too often, London is portrayed within the national context as a rich and robust powerhouse, which gobbles infrastructure funds and brashly demands priority in debates on the north-south divide. As those of us representing London seats know, however, deprivation is threaded through every quarter of our city, and has been for centuries. None the less, the capital now moves at such lightning pace that its local authorities must at times meet gargantuan challenges in serving their populations, using budgets calculated on outdated demographic assumptions. That can make the challenge of addressing child poverty extremely tricky.

The reward for all its economic successes is that London is one of only three regions in the UK where tax receipts outstrip public spending. That means that every Londoner gives £3,070 more in taxes than they receive in Government spend. For those of us representing outer London boroughs, I suspect that effect on public spending figures may be even more pronounced. It has long been assumed that inner-London boroughs have the highest need. I believe we now desperately need to reassess those outdated assumptions and catch up with the growing pressures on outer-London boroughs such as Havering.

Havering is one of London’s lowest-funded boroughs, yet it has the oldest population in the capital as well as the fastest growing number of children of any borough for the past three years in a row. During a six-year period from 2010 to 2015, some 4,536 children settled in the borough, leading to a huge demand for children’s social care and services for those with disabilities and special educational needs. I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), for the additional £2.1 million provided to the borough in the new funding settlement, but we now need a wholesale review of funding in London to keep up with the changing demographics. I shall be contributing to the Government’s consultation in that regard.

Population change also strains housing supply, which is causing rents to leap in Havering. The link between child poverty and workless households is well established, and the Government’s fantastic record on driving down unemployment should be recognised as the huge achievement that it is for the impact on individuals’ lives. For some families, however, a regular wage may not be sufficient to cope with rapidly rising housing costs. I have visited some of the temporary accommodation available in Havering for families and, while staff and council do a fantastic job in working with children who stay there, it is no substitute for safe, warm and high-quality homes.

Havering is champing at the bit to undertake an ambitious estate regeneration plan so that it can provide local families with the greater range of affordable—if I may use that word—housing options that they need. If we are serious about urgently tackling the housing crisis and child poverty, we need to unleash those councils that have sensible, financially sound plans to lead redevelopment themselves, not least as they can tolerate lower returns than private developers. I was glad to see the Budget lift the housing revenue account cap in high-demand areas to aid housing delivery plans, and I welcome additional support for those who are homeless or struggling with private rents.

Education has always provided a crucial ladder when it comes to poverty alleviation, and I am lucky to represent an area with some of the best primary schools in England, including in some of the country’s poorest wards. Local schools have done a fantastic job of offering children a window into some of the opportunities our city can offer them by building partnerships with universities, businesses and museums, engaging in such things as the Brilliant Club scholars programme and pushing hard on numeracy and literacy. Next week I shall be supporting the World Book Day literacy and development drive to encourage families to read with their children.

We must not let that progress slip in the transition to secondary school. The requirement to fill in a form for a child to be given a secondary place can unfairly disadvantage pupils on free school meals, as parents are often late or poorly informed, or they fail to complete the form at all. Consequently, too many pupils who have free school meals—especially white British boys—end up without a place and are served the left-over allocations. That can concentrate children in failing schools and entrench social problems. We should instead look at how best to remove the necessity of a form for pupils on free school meals, perhaps by local authorities automatically awarding them their local school unless a parent wants to exercise a preference.

In the past 20 years there has been an intense focus on how to enhance academic performance in inner-city areas, particularly among black and minority ethnic students, which has produced tremendous results. We now need to refresh the approach by looking with the same urgency at the new neglected groups. Perhaps a new Teach First should deal with white working-class areas that are falling behind, or there could be a major drive to improve the quality of pre-school provision by skilling up the nursery workforce, or the creation of dedicated core schools for excluded children. With the number of secondary permanent exclusions climbing for the fourth consecutive year, too many students are being taught in pupil referral units. Core schools would provide an alternative key stage 4 curriculum, with English, maths and science alongside two further technical qualifications. Close working with social services teams could give excluded children safety and stability and flag up problems in the home that can drive child poverty.

Finally, I have focused on the funding needs of outer-London boroughs, but I would caution against seeing child poverty alleviation as something that can be solved by Government money alone.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I respect the hon. Lady for turning up for the debate. We did not have any Conservative Members in the child refugee debate. Does she think at all that £27 billion taken out of social security since 2010 has had any effect on child poverty in London?

Julia Lopez: We have to look at outcomes as well as methods and spending. I certainly remember that under the Labour Government there were some serious and
entrenched poverty problems, because the benefits system was trapping people and there was not a belief that people could do more than they were given. I believe in people and that some of the Government’s reforms have fundamentally changed a lot of people’s lives for the better. Driving employment in households is an absolutely fantastic achievement. We have almost become accustomed to banking these incredible job figures, but they actually mean something to a lot of people. It is incredibly valuable for children to see working parents.

Siobhain McDonagh: Could the hon. Lady identify any word that I have said that suggests that work is not important? Work is important, but support and ability to earn enough to live are important, too.

Julia Lopez: I was not aware that I was attacking the hon. Lady, and I am sorry if that is how she felt.

I have been a councillor in Tower Hamlets and I observed meeting after meeting where councillors in that borough indulged in what I have to admit was an orgy of blame—not just Labour but other councillors, too—suggesting that every negative statistic that the borough racked up was down to Tory cuts, despite overseeing a budget of more than £1 billion, being in receipt millions of unspent section 106 contributions and being able to access all manner of special funding pots due to its poverty ranking. Rarely did councillors expend the same energy in the nitty-gritty of whether the borough’s programmes were effective and delivering results in alleviating poverty.

To give a small example, in my scrutiny of its youth services provision I found that Tower Hamlets was spending more than £1,000 on each young person with whom it came into contact at the extremely poorly attended youth services. That was equivalent to nearly £300 a head in the 13 to 16-year-old population, when Lambeth, Southwark and Greenwich, which are also Labour boroughs and have thriving services, were spending under £150. An attachment by adults to empty youth centres offering outdated programmes was cutting young people off from a much more modern approach to outreach that truly catered to young people’s ambitions. This is what I mean by the need to focus on outcomes rather than methods; there was a real obsession in Tower Hamlets about methods rather than whether results were being delivered—signalling politics rather than delivery politics.

Similarly, a former child services officer advised me that the council had been spending tens of thousands of pounds annually on one troubled family in the borough. It was only when budgets were tightened that officers were forced to review whether those interventions had been working; they realised that the family would be better off if the mother had the confidence to leave an abusive partner. Through very intensive one-to-one work with her, she built up the courage to leave and to get back into the workplace, giving her children the stability to start school again. The council was saved huge amounts of money.

I say this because two of the three national constituencies where child poverty statistics are starkest sit in the borough of Tower Hamlets—one of the most incompetently run corners of our capital. We cannot simply throw a blanket of taxpayers’ money over every problem. Resource is important—I am not denying that—but it must be accompanied by competent governance if it is truly to make a difference to driving down child poverty.
as we have already discussed. On top of all of this, most benefits for working families have been frozen, which has cut families’ real incomes. There is a serious shortage of genuinely affordable childcare.

I am proud that the last Labour Government introduced Sure Start, the transformative early years programme giving young children the best start in life. When Labour left office in May 2010, there were 24 Sure Start centres in Enfield. Now there are just five. Government cuts to these vital education services are a scandal and our most disadvantaged children are paying the price. As Save the Children has said, the consequences of a lack of quality early years education for children living in poverty are lifelong and “it harms not only their quality of life, but their ability to learn and develop at a crucial stage in their lives.”

The lack of Government action to address these issues is in stark contrast to the leadership shown by Sadiq Khan, the Labour Mayor of London, who is championing the London living wage to support low income families.

Joan Ryan: The Minister may make an intervention if he wishes.

The Mayor is investing £15 million to buy homes for homeless Londoners and recently he launched the capital’s largest living rent scheme, to offer more Londoners a genuinely affordable home. He is supporting early years hubs, delivering on his promise to improve access to high-quality, affordable early years education for the most disadvantaged families in the capital. However, the child poverty crisis is a national issue that demands a co-ordinated, national response from the Government.

I urge Ministers to restore targets to end child poverty. The Government must support local authorities as they attempt to address the worst effects of child poverty in their areas, instead of gutting their budgets. Enfield Council alone has had its central Government funding slashed by £161 million since 2010, with another £35 million in cuts due by next year. The Government need to fix their broken housing policy and help to make sure that all families in Enfield, particularly those on low incomes, have the chance to live in a safe, secure and genuinely affordable home. Universal credit still needs to be fixed to ensure that it does not drive even more families into debt, arrears and eviction, and the Government need to take steps immediately to provide more good-quality childcare and early years education.

Child Poverty Action Group rightly says that poverty “damages childhoods; it damages life chances; and it damages us all in society.”

I am proud that the last Labour Government lifted 1 million children out of poverty. They addressed this issue and, to a large extent, they succeeded. It is time that, rather than making the situation worse, this Government got their act together for these children or moved over and let someone else do it.

3.40 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on introducing the debate so powerfully.

There is more than enough challenge to go around without us having to worry too much about the pressures between inner London and the suburbs, which we have already heard enough about. There are real and growing challenges in suburban London, but child poverty remains acute in inner London, and it is worsening. If London has something of a reputational challenge as a wealthy city, I assure hon. Members that the City of Westminster has an acute reputational challenge. The borough, which contains Mayfair and Knightsbridge, is one of the poorest in the country. It has the sixth highest level of child poverty in the country after housing costs are taken into account, and my constituency has the 15th highest; well over half the children in wards such as Church Street live in poverty.

As Londoners, we must rise to that challenge and recognise that people in other parts of the country struggle to understand that a city with such extraordinary wealth—a city that contains the City of London and the iconic tourist attractions that are so familiar to everyone—is also the region with the highest poverty. It has more children in poverty than Scotland and Wales combined.

As Members of Parliament, we have to try to explain that and help people understand it. We must ensure that the specific drivers of poverty in London are understood, and that we get our fair share of resources.

Let me add to the comments by my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan). Poverty is not an act of God, but is brought about by a failure by the Government and by market forces to ensure that incomes are sufficiently high to lift children out of poverty, that housing is available at a reasonable cost, and that there are adequate services to support intervention for low-income families and children. I, too, am extremely proud that a Labour Government, although they were not perfect—no Government are—were able, though a mixture of the tax credit system, benefit changes and service delivery, to lift 1 million children out of poverty. That has gone into reverse: according to households below average income statistics, an extra 400,000 children have fallen into poverty since 2010. That was an absolutely foreseeable and deliberate consequence of Government policies, including the freezing and cutting of benefits, the two-child policy, benefit caps and the rents policy, which I shall come on to.

I am also proud of the children’s centres—500 have closed as a result of Government cuts to early intervention and local government funding—and national childcare strategy that a Labour Government set up. Under the previous Labour Mayor, Ken Livingstone, there was a London childcare affordability programme, which did so much to make childcare accessible to lower-income working families. So many of those measures have gone into reverse in the past few years.

As all Opposition Members have generally stressed, housing costs lie at the heart of poverty in the capital. It is housing costs that eat so much of people’s income, and it is housing costs that are driving a crisis of homelessness and housing insecurity. The interface between low-paid work, particularly when that work is insecure, the freeze and in some cases cuts in social security—particularly housing support—and high housing costs is a particular stress point.

Two important reports were published today, including another very important one by Citizens Advice, which found that one in 10 adults in this country has an
income that varies from month to month. Someone who lives on a variable income, particularly when that income is low, but has high fixed costs—particularly high housing costs—is likely to find themselves in difficulty. That in turn feeds the epidemic of evictions, which we have heard are happening particularly in outer London, and high debt. That feeds the crisis of mental ill health—anxiety and depression—which is a real challenge for families who are struggling to get by on low incomes and in so many cases see their homes at risk. The pressures of housing and poverty are literally making people sick in their tens, if not hundreds, of thousands. That often drives people to seek advice and help, which are less available than they have been for a great many years.

It has already been said that the most vulnerable and most acutely disadvantaged families in the capital are those who are either in the homelessness system or at risk of homelessness. After many years of decline, the number of families in homelessness accommodation has risen significantly. Some 45,000 children in the capital now live in temporary accommodation, up from 28,000 when the Conservatives came into government in 2010. Those families often live in deeply substandard accommodation—unfortunately, temporary accommodation offers some of the worst conditions any of us have seen—yet they pay excessive rents. As a deliberate consequence of Government policy, those families also find themselves subject to rent restrictions and a benefits cap, even though no family that is accepted as homeless has any say whatsoever in the accommodation they receive, or the price they pay for it.

Joan Ryan: I wonder whether my hon. Friend has the same experience in her surgeries as I have in mine. Constituents come to see me who pay extortionate rents in the private sector for disgraceful property that is below habitable standards—it is damp, perhaps does not have hot water or heating, or has an out-of-date boiler—yet when I complain and try to get enforcement, they get what is called a revenge eviction and find themselves out on the streets. They have to go into temporary accommodation, they might be moved out of London, and their children might have to change schools. They continually suffer massive disruption to their lives.

Ms Buck: I totally agree. The Government will have to rise to the challenge of revenge evictions. That is well overdue. As was said, particularly by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden, that challenge is in part down to the fact that the face of poverty in London is increasingly in the private rented sector. We have seen a shift of low-income households from social rented accommodation into private rented accommodation, where rents are higher, insecurity is a constant problem and, because people on low incomes have so little choice in accommodation, people find themselves in the worst conditions.

Siobhain McDonagh: My hon. Friend is making her erudite, detailed knowledge obvious to everyone. Does she know that the Trust for London identified that the average family in poverty 10 years ago lived in inner London on welfare benefits, and today the average family in poverty in London live in outer London, are in work, and live in the private rented sector?

Ms Buck: That is absolutely right. That paints a picture of change, which, as a deliberate policy, has been into the private rented sector. The private rented sector is shifting further out, to outer London, and as has been said, the changing face of poverty is a working face: the number of families in poverty in work has risen sharply in the last decade. We all recognise that work is integral to getting out of poverty and to people’s sense of purpose and wellbeing in life, but work is not sufficient to lift people out of poverty. Above all, it is not sufficient for people faced with high housing costs.

Now, 43% of poor children in the capital are in private rented accommodation; that has increased from a third 10 years ago. The shift into the private rented sector is happening in large part because the social rented sector is in decline and no longer available for people to live in. People are being diverted into the private rented sector, even though their needs for security and affordability would be addressed far better in the social rented sector.

It gets worse: there has also been a deliberate policy of raising social rents above inflation, and shifting properties that were once attached to a social rent to a higher, “affordable” rent. In recent years, we have seen 100,000 properties converted from social rents to this Orwellian concept of an affordable rent, which traps even families who live in social rented accommodation into paying a much higher proportion of their income as rent than they were. That in itself is a reason why even in the social rented sector an additional 40,000 children now live in poverty.

A second report was launched today by Shout, the campaign for social housing, written for it by Capital Economics. It found that the policy of raising social rents is bad economics, as well as being bad for low-income families, because it reduces people’s ability to earn, and even families in homes for social rent are finding themselves unable to cover their housing costs. They will also increasingly be subject to the caps that flow out of the £25 billion taken out of social security expenditure by the Government.

We know, from the lived experience of British poverty in the last few years, that measures cutting social security, raising housing costs, reducing the availability of social rented housing and cutting vital support services do not work. We know that because poverty is going up, and it is predicted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies to rise sharply by 2021. As a consequence of those policies, we anticipate the first sustained increase in inequality in this country since the 1980s. We know from experience abroad that a policy that drives low-income families into high-rent accommodation does not work; it is bad for work incentives, and bad for those families.

The answer to all that—apart from unfreezing benefits, tackling the structural problems with universal credit, and dealing with issues such as the million children who, under universal credit, will lose entitlement to free school dinners—is to tackle the rent burden on families. That is best done by ensuring that low-income people have the opportunity to live in the social rented sector.

This was uttered today by the Conservative chair of the Local Government Association, in endorsing the Capital Economics report on the problem of high social rent:

“We have to let the state build and dispel the myth that state intervention is subsidy. It’s not. It’s investment in an asset”.

[Ms Karen Buck]
I do not often agree with leading Conservatives, but I firmly concur with that statement. As a famous song from New York City a few years ago stated, “The rent is too damn high.” Until we can tackle this problem, I am afraid we will be struggling with the problem of rising poverty in London.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. According to my calculations, we have 13 minutes left before the wind-ups.

3.54 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on winning the debate and on her speech. We have had a degree of consensus on a number of issues that are critical to tackling child poverty, particularly housing. I want to say quite a bit about housing, but first I want to talk about my constituency.

The Royal Borough of Kingston is often seen as a wealthy borough. It is true that it has some very wealthy parts, but over many years representing three quarters of the borough, I have found that that external perception is inaccurate when it comes to the lives of thousands of people in the borough. We have pockets of severe deprivation. In wards such as Norbiton, where we have the Cambridge estate, Cambridge Gardens and the King Henry estate, people are really struggling, daily. There are also estates in central Surbiton, Chessington and Old Malden where levels of poverty equal those anywhere in the capital.

I often worry that the external perception, whether in City Hall, Whitehall or even the Guildhall in Kingston, means that people do not recognise that there are families in real need. As we do not have some of the social infrastructure found in other boroughs, some children in those struggling families get an even worse deal, because there is not that wider network of support. I am not asking the Government to give us the sort of money for social deprivation that other boroughs might get—that argument would be rejected—but I want the Minister to work with his colleagues and realise that in boroughs such as mine, there are vulnerable families. That needs to be recognised more. If he takes nothing else away from my speech, I hope he takes that point.

Housing issues are as severe in Kingston as in many other boroughs in London, and of course the most vulnerable and low-income families are affected most severely, in numerous ways, many of which have been touched on. To give an example of how that can multiply child poverty, when these families are evicted by their private rented sector landlord, they ask the council for support and are given temporary emergency accommodation outside the borough, sometimes miles away from the children’s schools and where the parents work—and the parents are often in work.

The impact of poverty on those children can be severely affected by the dislocation in how our housing support works. Often they cannot go to school, and in that temporary period, which can last for months, they are often in very poor accommodation. As a result, the school is less able to support that family. That is just one example of how housing policy in London is affecting many people day in, day out, and making the experience of children that much worse.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden talked about the importance of social housing; that has been a general theme. I could not agree more. We need to completely change the whole approach to building houses. For decades, under all Governments, we hoped that the private sector would produce the houses, but if we look over five or six decades of house building, we see that we have only ever had serious increases in housing when the state has been directing and building houses. I think it was the hon. Lady who said that 1968 was the last peak year of house building. The idea that the private sector and the free market will deliver the amount and types of homes that we need to go back to those periods is for the birds. It is just not true.

I am fascinated by the quote from the Conservative leader of the Local Government Association. Maybe we are moving toward an understanding, at least in local government, that the state needs to drive house building: otherwise we will never meet demand, particularly in London, but no doubt also in cities elsewhere.

I hope the Minister will address the need to rethink the fundamentals of our approach to house building. We will not take communities with us and build the number of houses necessary unless councils and the state are allowed to be far more proactive, not just in finances, but in how the whole planning system works.

I end by talking about one of the major poverty reduction programmes in recent decades, how it worked and the lessons we should take from it: the Sure Start project. I found the Sure Start programme, brought in during the first term of the Labour Government, very exciting, because it was trying to take an area-based approach, so that there was no stigma in the services being provided, and to take a more holistic approach, bringing different service providers together in a way we had not seen before. To some extent, it worked. In its first years, there were no Sure Start projects in my constituency, and I went to other boroughs in London to visit them, to see how they were working and to learn about them, because I thought it was an important policy innovation.

There is no doubt that some evidence suggests that for some people, Sure Start was effective. However, we should also look at the evidence that showed that there were poor families with children that it did not reach—particularly what are sometimes called the hard-to-reach families. Sure Start often did not manage to reach those. We need to think not just of area-based poverty programmes, although they still have a role, as Sure Start showed. Those projects that innovated by using a whole series of indicators to try to identify the families who were in most need, most under threat and most vulnerable had some promise.

One of the things I regret in recent years is that some of the innovative programmes outside the Sure Start family that tried to help those who are, in many ways, the most vulnerable in our society, were cut. If we are to make a sustained attack on reducing child poverty, we need to think of policy programmes that will meet the needs of those particular families. Otherwise, we are not providing for the children most in need. I hope the Minister will respond on whether the issue is only area-based programmes, or whether there are targeted, innovative programmes that we should look at as well.
Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing the debate, and on the way she has set the scene. She sets a real example to us all as a champion of her constituency and our city.

One of the myths my hon. Friend has buried today is that London is a rich city for the many, rather than just the few. We have seen that, in fact, London has the worst levels of child poverty of any region of the country. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) indicated, what are often thought of as some of the richest boroughs in the centre of London—Westminster, Camden and Islington—are right up there in terms of child poverty levels.

My borough of Hammersmith and Fulham is not far behind: after housing costs are taken into consideration, 35% of children there live in poverty, and 33% do not reach the expected levels of speech and language skills at the age of five. Where children are on free school meals, that rises to 43%, and I have schools that have up to 70% of children on free school meals. If one looks at the worst-affected wards—in my case, the Wormholt and White City ward—the figure for children living in poverty after housing costs is 45%.

As has been said by a number of Opposition Members, housing is perhaps the most significant issue that makes a difference here. If one looks at Wormholt and White City, the figure is 30% before housing costs are taken into consideration—still very high—but 45% afterward. In some ways that is slightly counterintuitive, because it is a ward with high levels of social housing, where one would expect rents to be relatively low, compared with the very high market rents, let alone the cost of purchasing a property, in the area. However, as was indicated, in many ways, social housing is a thing of the past—not only because of the conversion, particularly by some housing associations, of social rents to affordable rents, but because of the sale of council houses, which are then not replaced. We have the obscenity of slum landlords owning sometimes dozens of properties on estates, and renting them out at—or in some cases above—the housing benefit cap, driving families into poverty, as well as making them live in extremely poor conditions.

It is not the case that nothing is being done to address that. I praise my council, Hammersmith and Fulham, which moved to Labour control in 2014. It has done what it can to revive and support Sure Start and, sadly, in many ways, to support food banks and open new centres to support advice services. It has done what it can, given the vast local government cuts over that period, to try to alleviate the worst effects of child poverty. I praise the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, who has also been mentioned. He is trying to tackle low pay, improve childcare and build genuinely affordable housing—very different from his predecessor. They are pushing water uphill, however, given the cuts that have been made.

In an intervention, I said £27 billion had been taken out of social security programmes since 2010. That is a phenomenal sum of money. We have seen the effect across a whole raft of Government policies, deliberately introduced by the coalition Government, and continued by this Government: the two-child rule; the benefit cap; the benefit freeze; and now universal credit.

One figure that caught my eye in the excellent briefings we were given for this debate was evidence from Southwark Council that the average council rent account is £8 in credit; but for universal credit recipients, it is £1,178 in arrears. People are being evicted and are struggling to make ends meet because of the effects of universal credit, particularly the housing elements. Until we see a change in Government policy, or better still a change of Government, the situation will not get better. The prediction is that it will get worse, and that average levels of child poverty will be back well over 40% in a few years’ time.

I conclude by referring to a debate I had in this Chamber on Tuesday, on regeneration and social housing in an area called Earl’s Court and West Kensington, in my and the neighbouring borough. It is billed as the largest onsite development in the world outside China. There, 760 affordable homes and council homes are to be demolished without the promise of a replacement home for all the people living there. Some 7,500 homes are to be built, with not one additional social rented home on that site. When such policies are pursued, it is no wonder that we are dragging people into poverty and not giving any hope to children who are growing up in overcrowded, appalling conditions. That was not an accident or market forces, but the deliberate policy of a Tory Secretary of State, Tory Mayor and Tory council leader, conspiring to ensure that we got fewer genuinely affordable homes.

Julia Lopez: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy Slaughter: I do not have time, I am afraid.

The Minister knows that, because he was a deputy Mayor for London at the time, so he might want to address his record, as perhaps might some of the other Members who have spoken. I am afraid to say that the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) might want to address his record in government, because that is when this dates back to.

I have 20 seconds left in which to speak, and I would not like to refuse courtesy to the hon. Lady, so I will give way.

Julia Lopez: I think it should be agreed that housing supply issues are failures of successive Governments. I recall that, between 2000 and 2010, there was a buy-to-let boom, the arrival of huge sums of foreign cash, extremely loose monetary policy, extremely loose borders, the forced divestment of council housing stock to arm’s length organisations, and a very low level of social housing being built—indeed lower than in the Thatcher years. The hon. Gentleman should have the good grace to take responsibility for that.

Andy Slaughter: I will never be accused of not having good grace. I leave the hon. Lady with one fact: in the last three years in which the Conservatives were in power on Hammersmith and Fulham Council, they actually managed to reduce the number of social homes. That is quite some achievement.

4.10 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham
and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing such an important debate.

I have been struck by the passion and clear sense of all the speeches we have heard from Members championing the need to improve the situation of those in poverty. From the stories my hon. Friend told about some of the impacts, I think we will all remember the image of children guarding their school dinner plates with their arms to stop other people taking their food. That is horrific, given the scale of wealth in this country. She made a powerful and moving speech.

I also draw particular attention to the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), who, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), talked about her pride, which I share, in the last Labour Government’s record in lifting 1 million children out of poverty. I also draw attention to the passion of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North, which was also touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), in talking about how such extreme wealth can sit next to such poverty, and the image that people from outside London have of it.

The debate was prompted by the release of disturbing new statistics by the End Child Poverty coalition, which show that, in some parts of London, more than half of children are now growing up in poverty; in Bethnal Green and Bow it is 54%, and in Poplar and Limehouse it is 53%. The Minister questioned those statistics at the last Work and Pensions questions. I suggest that Government Ministers are in no position to do that, given the Government’s reluctance to publish up-to-date figures on a wide range of social security issues. The coalition Government only agreed to continue to publish data on child poverty at all after being pressured by the Opposition and voluntary organisations working in the field.

However, even the Department for Work and Pensions’ statistics on child poverty show that London has the highest rate of child poverty of any part of the UK. According to DWP figures, 37% of children in London are growing up in poverty after housing costs are taken into account. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that current Government tax and benefit policies will see that rise to 41% over the next two years.

Although the rate of child poverty is highest in inner London, it is clear that child poverty is a London-wide problem. For example, some 45% of children in Edmonton are growing up in poverty, as well as 40% in Enfield North and 37% in Croydon North. It is not only the geographical spread that is the problem but the severity of the child poverty. In 2016-17, 40,000 children in London received help from food banks, according to the Trussell Trust, which is of course the largest but by no means the only provider of food aid in the UK. The latest figures for this year show a similar level of need.

Free school meals ensure that children in families on low incomes get one hot meal a day, which is vital for their wellbeing and ability to learn. The Labour party would introduce free school meals for all primary school children and all secondary school children whose families claim universal credit. Under Government plans, children in families that claim universal credit will no longer be eligible for free school meals if their families earn more than £7,400 a year, which is such a small sum of money that it is difficult to understand how the Department could come up with that policy. Will the Government step back from introducing a cliff edge for eligibility for free school meals?

Many speakers have highlighted the significance of the high housing costs in London; it is something that those of us who do not live in London find quite astonishing. Last September, the median private rent in London for a one-bed property was £1,250 a month, compared with £595 for England as a whole. The level of private renting is at its highest since the 1970s, and private sector rents in London are more than double the average for England as a whole.

Over the past five years, the cheapest fifth of private rents have increased faster than rents in the sector overall. Although the number of children in social housing living in poverty has risen in recent years, the number of children in private rented accommodation living in poverty tripled over the decade up to 2015-16, by which point more than half of all children in private rented homes were living in poverty.

Seven in 10 households in temporary accommodation in England are in London, and more than 80% of them are households with children. Those children have no security in where they live. Levels of overcrowding in London are more than twice as high as the rest of England, and the rate of overcrowding is especially high for ethnic minority households. That means that children may not have the space to play or the peace and quiet they need to do homework. If there are family tensions, it is harder still for children to escape them.

Just 29,000 homes of all types were built in London per year between 2013-14 and 2015-16, and only 24% were—apparently—affordable, which is down 10% on the previous three years. No homes for social rent were built in London in the current Foreign Secretary’s last year as Mayor of London. The current Mayor has set a target in his London plan of 65,000 new homes a year, half of which will be affordable. He also wants to redefine “affordable”, as the current definition of 80% of market rate is beyond all too many people, as many Members have said.

Government funding for affordable homebuilding in London is still less than half the amount spent in 2009-10. The Chancellor announced an additional £2 billion for affordable housing in the Budget, but the Office for Budget Responsibility later revealed that that came from existing housing pots. The Mayor has called for £2.7 billion a year to fund affordable housing in London. Will the Government ensure that he gets the funding he needs to meet London’s housing need?

High London rents mean low-income families are likely to face a shortfall between their housing benefit and their rent. However, the Government have not only failed to back new homebuilding but also cut local housing allowance for private sector tenants in 2011, and then introduced the benefit cap in 2013, which they lowered further in 2016. Will the Government abolish the benefit cap, as Labour would?

In 2013, the Government also replaced council tax benefit with council tax support. Even families with very low incomes are now generally expected to pay some council tax. In Labour London boroughs, 200,000 low-income residents paid, on average, at least £200 more a year towards their council tax than they would have if they had received council tax benefit. Will the
Government recognise the pressure they are putting on the finances of families on low incomes and act to restore council tax benefit?

The result of sharply rising rents and less help with housing costs is that low income families are more at risk of losing their homes, which causes misery, for families with children in particular. The total number of eviction orders rose in the five years to 2015-16. Possession orders, rather than mortgage orders, made up 97% of the total eviction orders in that year. High eviction rates are occurring in boroughs with high proportions of families with children living in the private rented sector and receiving housing benefit. Nine of the 10 boroughs with the highest eviction rates are in outer London.

The long waits that universal credit claimants experience for initial payment put them at particular risk of eviction. Increasing numbers of families with children in the capital are claiming universal credit as the full service is rolled out. There is clear evidence from the Residential Landlords Association that landlords are also increasingly reluctant to let to universal credit claimants in the first place.

The Government announced the removal of the waiting period and said that they would make it easier to get an advance, but they refuse to publish regular statistics on timeliness or advances. I had to table a written question in January to find out that, even under the old system of a six-week wait, one fifth of claimants were still not being paid in full on time, and 13% were not receiving any payment at all. The Government would not say how many people had requested an advance so although more people are getting them, we do not know the extent of the need.

The Minister questioned the End Child Poverty coalition’s statistics. Since the Minister sets such store by accurate figures, will he give a commitment to publish regular statistics on the timeliness of payments and on how many people both request and receive an advance, so that we know whether the changes the Government introduced are making a difference?

The Government do not publish statistics on households affected by the two-child policy either. Will they commit to doing so? That policy will have a particularly severe impact on some religious communities, where reproduction, use of contraception and family size are determined by beliefs, and where culture is also a factor. Those communities are important parts of London’s population, and some of them, such as the Bangladeshi communities in Tower Hamlets and Newham, are located in areas of high child poverty. A couple may well have planned a large family, then found that their circumstances have changed and that they need to receive social security. Will the Government reverse the pernicious two-child policy?

The Government’s stock answer when called to account on child poverty is that work is the best route out of poverty. Yes, it is better to be in work, but work should pay. That was supposed to be one of the foundations of universal credit. However, cuts to universal credit work allowances will hit families on low incomes hard. It is the case that 58% of people in poverty in London are in a family in which someone is in work; that is up from 44% a decade ago. And 17% of people in in-work poverty live in a household in which all the adults work. During the past decade, average weekly pay in London has fallen. In 2016, just over one fifth of workers in London were low paid, compared with 13% in 2005. There is a range of reasons for that, not least a rise in insecure employment. One third of temporary workers are on a temporary contract because they cannot find a permanent job. The figure is nearly 10% higher than in 2004.

Many parents of very young children want to work, but face the challenge of finding both a job that will fit in with parenting and affordable childcare. A recent Gingerbread study of lone parents in Camden highlighted the fact that very few part-time jobs were advertised on the Government’s own job search portal, with which all claimants have to register. The average cost of childcare in a nursery or from a childminder in London is just over £150 a week—more than £40 a week higher than the average for England.

Child poverty in London is not new. Charles Booth’s maps showing the geography of poverty at the end of the 19th century or Roger Mayne’s photos of 1950s Notting Hill testify to that. However, the End Child Poverty coalition’s statistics are still shocking. Rather than questioning the figures and trying to brush them under the carpet, the Government should react to them by making the tackling of child poverty the priority that it should be.

4.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): It is a great pleasure to appear before you, Sir Henry. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this important and very relevant debate, not least because I spent 16 years as a representative in central London, both as a councillor and as a London Assembly member—where I shared a constituency with the hon. Members for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter)—so I am well acquainted with some of the problems. Indeed, I started my career as a councillor as deputy chairman of the housing committee on Westminster City Council, dealing with the heavy investment that we made in the Mozart estate in Queen’s Park at the end of the 1990s, as the hon. Member for Westminster North may remember. This issue has been of importance to me in the past and remains so.

I emphasise from the outset that the Government are committed—the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden referred to this—to building a country that works for everyone, where no one and no community are left behind. I completely agree that we must continue to provide appropriate support for the least well-off and the disadvantaged in our society, so that we can make a meaningful and lasting difference to their lives and outcomes and those of their children.

However, I was disappointed to hear the hon. Lady say, as I think she did on the record, that work is no longer the route out of poverty. The Government believe that work offers families the best opportunity to get out of poverty and become self-reliant. That is why we are undertaking the most ambitious reform to the welfare system in decades—so that it supports people to find and stay in work.

The evidence about the impact of worklessness on children’s outcomes, in both the short and the long term, is clear. In 2014-15, 75% of children in workless
families failed to reach the expected standard at GCSE, compared with 39% for all working families and 52% for low-income working families.

**Ms Buck:** Will the Minister give way?

**Kit Malthouse:** No, I am short of time. As adults, children who grow up in workless families are more likely to be workless themselves, compared with children who grow up with working parents, which creates an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage. It is therefore vital that we continue with our policies to encourage work and to address the often complex employment barriers faced by many disadvantaged families.

A number of hon. Members raised concerns about working families who are in poverty. However, the evidence is clear. Adults in workless families are four times more likely to be in poverty than those in working families. Children living in workless households are five times more likely to be in poverty than those in which all the adults work. Children in lone-parent families are three times less likely to be in poverty if their parent is in full-time work. And the chances of a child being in poverty if one parent works full time and the other part time is one in 20.

We are making good progress. Nationally, there are 954,000 fewer workless households and 608,000 fewer children living in such households now, compared with 2010. In London, there are 197,000 fewer children in workless households than there were seven years ago. By 2016, the number of children in long-term workless households in London was less than half what it was in 2010. The latest data shows that the London employment rate has increased by 7.1 percentage points since 2010. Comparable national figures show a slightly lower increase of 5 percentage points, so London is doing better.

Universal credit is at the heart of the reforms and the positive change that the Government are committed to driving. Through universal credit, the welfare system is, for the first time, providing working people with the opportunity to progress in work and to work more hours so that they can increase their earnings and become financially secure. Once fully rolled out, it will boost employment by about 250,000 and generate £7 billion in economic benefits a year.

We are also committed to tackling poverty by helping people with the cost of living. The national living wage, rising to £7.83 an hour in 2018-19, has given the UK’s lowest earners their fastest pay rise in 20 years. The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) referred to the London living wage in glowing terms with regard to the current Mayor, but of course that project was started well before he came to office. Indeed, I am pleased to say that the largest expansion of the London living wage came when I was responsible for it at City Hall, between 2012 and 2016. However, that is not the only measure that we have taken. We have cut income tax for more than 30 million people and taken 4 million low earners out of income tax altogether. A typical basic rate taxpayer will now pay £1,000 less in tax compared with 2010.

Universal credit, with its generous childcare offer, has been designed to support parents to work after the birth of a child. Working parents on universal credit can have up to 85% of their childcare costs reimbursed, which is worth up to £1,108 a month for someone with two or more children. That is in addition to their entitlement of up to 30 hours of free childcare a week.

Hon. Members have raised serious concerns about child poverty rates, including the key findings in the End Child Poverty report, which came out a couple of weeks ago. Let me take this opportunity to emphasise that whichever way we look at child poverty rates—relative or absolute, and before or after housing costs—the headline national statistics published by the DWP show that in London all are lower than they were in 2010. Across the country, 600,000 fewer people are in absolute poverty now, compared with 2010—the figure is at a record low—and 200,000 fewer children are in absolute poverty.

Let me turn to the figures used by End Child Poverty. Those are projections based on Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs data from 2014, and even the academics who produced the analysis have pointed out the limitations in the method. More recent data, published by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs since the report, shows that rather than rising, the proportion of children in low-income families in London fell in 2015 to an estimated 19%, compared with 24% in 2014. Indeed, every parliamentary constituency saw falls between 2014 and 2015. That includes some of the areas highlighted by the report. For example, in Bethnal Green and Bow there was a fall of 12 percentage points and in Poplar and Limehouse a fall of 11 percentage points. There was a fall of 6 percentage points in Hackney South and Shoreditch, as there was in Westminster North and in Enfield North. The data and the projection from the data in 2014 were immediately contradicted by the data subsequently published for 2015.

Let me deal quickly with some of the specifics that were raised. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) raised the issue of child poverty targets. Some hon. Members will remember that there was recognition by the Government in the past that making a long-term difference to the lives of disadvantaged children required an approach that went beyond a focus on the welfare system. That is why the Government repealed the income-related targets set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010 and replaced them with new statutory measures of parental worklessness and, critically, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) mentioned, children’s educational attainment. That is vital; all the evidence points to its being critical to long-term welfare and prosperity. Those are the two areas that can make the biggest difference.

A number of hon. Members raised issues about housing. The Government have recognised that there is an issue with the housing market, and a huge amount of work is going on at the newly named Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. On standards, we agree that everyone deserves a decent home. That is why the numbers of homes that have been brought up to standard in both the public and the private sectors have increased very significantly, and the numbers that are below standard now lie at record lows. On housing generally, hon. Members will know that a significant amount of extra money has been put into the Government house building programme. That now stands at £9 billion, and no doubt there will be more initiatives to come from the Ministry of Housing.

We are also supporting, I believe, the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Westminster
North. It will give tenants the right to take legal action against landlords who do not fulfil their duties.

It was slightly disappointing to hear from the Opposition a fairly stout defence of the previous benefits system. As far as I can tell, that was a fraudulent system, perpetrating a lie upon the poor. It was designed to trap them in poverty. That is why we saw very little change in long-term poverty, which is what we are dedicated to tackling. I can reassure hon. Members that we are not complacent and particularly not in London, and we will be doing our best over the years to come to try to address the problems that have been raised.

4.29 pm

Siobhain McDonagh: I love my city. I love my constituency. I was born in it and have always lived in it.

It does the Minister no honour to set up an Aunt Sally on work when he knows very well that there is no Labour Member who does not believe in work. We believe that work should pay. For many of the people I meet in my constituency every week, work is not paying. They have nowhere to live. They have problems with food. Those are not stories I tell because I love to tell them. I say them because I see them. Unless we do something about what we see, we will all be discredited.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered child poverty in London.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 26 February 2018

Leaving the EU: Live Farm Animal Exports

4.30 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered e-petition 200205 relating to ending the export of live farm animals after the UK leaves the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I thank everyone who signed the petition, and especially its proposer, Janet Darlison, who for many years has shown a tireless devotion to pursuing the issues around live animal exports and to calling for those exports to be ended. Through her consistent efforts, and together with her husband, supporters and many others, she has raised public awareness about the issue, which is one of the reasons why the petition received such support.

I am leading the debate as a member of the Petitions Committee. The petition did not quite meet the threshold of 100,000 signatures that would usually trigger a debate, but the Committee felt that it was such an important issue and that there is such public awareness about it that it was right and appropriate to call a debate on it.

It is clear that exporting live animals is a complex and emotive issue. There is a variety of views about it, some of which are held very strongly. As I considered this debate and looked at the many representations and documents that were sent to me about it, which expressed a variety of views, one clear theme emerged: anything we debate today is at the moment covered by EU regulations and law, and any changes we choose to make will have to wait until we actually leave the European Union. That brings the situation that we face into sharp focus.

We all understand and agree that Britain is a nation of animal lovers, and has a proud history on animal welfare. I am sure that all hon. Members would testify to the sheer volume of correspondence we receive whenever an issue relating to animal welfare arises, whether it be about bees, puppies or live farm animals being exported. As a nation, we care deeply about our animals.

Sadly, for far too long, the animal welfare regulations that we have been forced to apply, particularly with regard to farm animals, have been determined by the EU. In many cases, they do not reflect the widely held views and values of the British people. We hope to change that. This issue is one of many good reasons for the UK to free itself from overburdening EU regulation and bureaucracy. It is worth noting that the UK’s animal welfare standards are among the highest in the world. From farm to fork, our farmers care deeply about the animals that they rear, as do the vast majority of people.

Last year, the Conservative party manifesto made the commitment to take early steps, as we leave the European Union, to control the export of live farm animals for slaughter. I absolutely support that position, and we should seek to take those steps soon after leaving the European Union.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we have to be clear that when animals are ready to be killed, they should not travel to be slaughtered, or be taken anywhere? They should be slaughtered right next to where they were reared. However, we do not want to get muddled: animals can be transported for further fattening, if they are transported in the right vehicles—with the right air conditioning and in the right type of vehicle for that species. We need to differentiate the two.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend pre-empts a point that I will make later. We need to differentiate animals that are exported and slaughtered shortly after they arrive—I see no point in that—and those that are exported for other reasons, such as for breeding stock or for fattening on. We need to consider those two different categories.

With the Conservative party manifesto commitment, the amount of support that this petition received, and the ten-minute rule Bill that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) has proposed, it is clear that this is a timely debate and an opportune moment for us to consider these issues—not least because of the awareness and concern among the general public.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) said, many people accept that there are differences between exporting animals for slaughter and for other reasons. At times, there are many good reasons to export animals, such as for breeding stock or for rearing on, but there seems to be no good reason to export an animal that is simply destined to be slaughtered soon after it reaches its destination. I can find no good or valid reason for that type of export to continue.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): We may not be able to legislate before we leave the European Union, but we could certainly suggest a good code of practice, to be followed with immediate effect.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and we should certainly consider that. If, for any reason, our opportunity to make those changes is delayed longer than we would like, some intervention along the way might be appropriate.

Many people agree with the reasonable proposition that animals should be slaughtered as close as possible to where they are raised, and that the carcasses should then be exported. We should seek to apply that; it is not only far more efficient, but clearly better for the animals. If we were to do that, there would also be an opportunity to up-sell and to create more jobs in the UK, rather than exporting the value-added part of the process with the live animals. A ban may have an impact on some trade, and we need to accept that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): If the hon. Gentleman accepts, as I think he does, that transporting live animals for long periods in poor conditions is wrong and not good from the point of view of animal welfare, why cannot he also accept that these animals should not be put into the same category as those that are destined for slaughter? If they are killed soon after they arrive, it is not the same as animals that may be reared on or fattened. We need to distinguish between these two categories.
welfare standards, what difference does it make whether they are slaughtered at the end, or going for fattening? Surely it is the transit that we ought to look at, regardless of what happens to the animals in the end.

Steve Double: From researching the issue and speaking to many people in the industry about it, I think the reality is that when animals are exported for breeding stock or for fattening, they are usually far more cared for, and are transported in far better conditions, because there is a higher value on them, than if they are being exported to be slaughtered. The market, for want of a better word, takes care of that issue. The problem is acute when animals are exported long distances to be slaughtered, because they tend to suffer the worst conditions. I do not think that applies when a higher value is put on the animal being exported.

As I was saying, a ban may have an impact on trade. For instance, our trade in sheep, as opposed to lamb, relies on exports because there is a very limited market for mutton in the UK; some may think that we should look into changing that, but that is the situation. Mutton sheep fetch £70 to £80 a head when sold in the UK, but up to £200 a head when exported live to parts of the EU with higher demand. Even in that example, however, we need to consider whether that additional profit is right, or whether we should do the right thing for the animal, despite the impact on the market. We need to do everything we can to stop the unnecessary suffering of exported animals.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the matter is currently regulated by EC Regulation No. 1/2005. Is he saying that that regulation does not ensure the necessary levels of animal welfare? I have to say that my experience, and that of farmers in my constituency and elsewhere, says otherwise.

Steve Double: There are genuine concerns. A lot of documented and anecdotal evidence suggests that the existing EU regulations are not always adhered to, and that animals sometimes suffer unnecessarily in transit, despite the current regulatory framework.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): Surely it is not just about the conditions—grim though they may be—in which animals are transported; it is also that the conditions at their destination are likely to be of a lower standard than we would expect in this country. Our animal welfare standards are generally higher, and given all the noises coming from the Government over the last few months, they are likely to rise, not fall, which will make the issue even more critical. It is not just about the transport, but about the conditions that animals live in.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The petition calls for a ban on the export of live animals, but wider animal welfare considerations are also relevant. We have very high standards, and many of us want them improved once we leave the European Union. We should expect those higher standards to be adhered to, because we should be setting an example in this country. That is what many of us want.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has made it clear that he understands the desire to look into the issue as we leave the European Union, and that he is committed to restricting this trade. The Government are preparing proposals on live exports for consultation, and are looking very seriously at a ban in the near future. Even within the current restrictions, we have seen some progress, as the records show: as recently as 2000, more than 750,000 live animals were exported for slaughter or fattening, but by 2016 that figure had fallen to 43,000. The direction of travel is already changing, but many of us agree that we want the trade to end altogether.

Tougher regulations and public awareness have led to a switch to exporting carcasses rather than live animals. However, there is still a busy trade in live animals between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and I see no reason why that should not continue, post Brexit. Dairy cattle are routinely sent to the Republic, and the milk they produce is sent back to Northern Ireland. Calves cross the border for fattening, too. Concerns have been raised that to circumvent a ban, a trade might develop whereby live exports are shipped to Northern Ireland, then sent on to the Republic, and then sent on from there. Apart from that being hugely expensive, and thus unlikely, there is already legislation on onward journey times, conditions and the need for approved and posted journey plans. Limiting journey times further might address the issue and prevent any chicanery aimed at circumventing a future ban. There are clearly far wider issues and decisions to be agreed on with regard to the Irish border, but I certainly do not intend to get into them today. With regard to animal movements, I believe we should leave Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to continue as they are, without fear of creating loopholes, post Brexit.

I have taken into account and looked carefully at a range of proposals and concerns from several groups, including the National Farmers Union. There are concerns about tariffs being imposed on carcasses, post Brexit. I accept that point of view, but we have yet to see how such matters will be settled, and furthermore there will be new and bigger markets for us to pursue, post Brexit. British food has worldwide acclamation. We can and will do better with our food exports, post Brexit. The outcome of the tariff issue is still unknown, but it cannot be a deal breaker when we take our decision on the animal welfare standards that are to apply. It could be argued that tariffs might apply to live exports as opposed to carcass trade, but I see no value in speculating on that. There is no substitute for doing the right thing, on either animal welfare or leaving the EU. There might be choppy waters ahead, but I would rather face that interim phase than be hamstrung forever by the regulations that we are currently subject to.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): My hon. Friend’s mention of choppy waters brings me to my feet. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and I are both well aware that cattle are moved from Shetland and the Orkneys in purpose-built equipment on purpose-built vessels, with water and in very safe and good conditions. The cattle and sheep moved from Shetland are shipped for 12 hours on board a purpose-built vessel. I would not want this debate to hide the fact that exporting animals can be—and is—done properly. It is paramount, particularly for islands...
off Scotland, that we do not get it into our heads that exporting over water is somehow a significant or major problem.

**Steve Double**: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the local situation in the UK, which has a very well developed market for food. Within the UK, we can ensure that standards are adhered to, that animals are moved about in the best possible conditions, and that their welfare is paramount. Unfortunately, once animals leave the UK, we lose the ability to ensure that those standards are adhered to. His point highlights one of the problems: we can make our regulations as stringent as we like, post Brexit, but even the current rules are all too often flouted because we cannot enforce them beyond our own shores.

The creator of the petition has recorded serious animal welfare shortcomings, in breach of current regulations, as lorries arrive at UK ports ahead of an onward journey. As I said, there is documented evidence that the further animals travel from British shores, the more they suffer in transit. That is not only because of distance and travel time, more alarmingly, they are more likely to suffer heat, a lack of food, water and rest, stress, injury, and even death. There is an unacceptable disparity between the conditions and circumstances of slaughter at their final location, and the high and monitored standards that we adhere to in the UK.

There are arguments in favour of allowing the export of high-value breeding stock to continue post Brexit—a point that has been well made. These prized animals have always fared far better in transit than those destined for immediate slaughter. The live export of animals for slaughter has dwindled dramatically in recent years. It has already been banned for many years in New Zealand, which has had no significant detriment to its meat export market. That should encourage us that achieving a ban is possible.

The UK has never been frightened of doing the right and decent thing, particularly when it comes to animals, and I believe that we can take great encouragement from that, and can be confident that this Government will act. We have already seen clear, positive action taken on animal welfare. For example, there has been a tenfold increase in the minimum sentence for animal cruelty, the banning of the ivory trade, action being taken on puppy farming, and clear action to protect our marine environment from plastic waste. That gives us confidence that this Government are determined to address this issue and make sure that action is taken.

We can be proud of our record, but there is more that we can do when it comes to animal welfare. The new freedoms afforded by Brexit will reinstate our sovereignty over these matters. We can once again do what is right and proper for our nation, our people and our animals, and we can fulfil a manifesto promise regarding live animal exports. Once again, I thank all those who signed the petition. We look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say at the end of the debate.

4.51 pm

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Wilson. I thank the Petitions Committee for allowing today’s debate. As has been said, the petition did not quite reach 100,000 signatures—I think there are about 93,000 at the moment, which is a really good effort—but I am very glad that we decided to have the debate anyway. Like the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), I pay tribute to Janet Darlison, the creator of the petition, for all her work in promoting it and for creating the momentum that has brought us here today.

When the Minister comes to speak, I hope that we will have a little more clarity on what exactly the Government’s position is, because at the moment that is lacking. I am certainly none the wiser having heard the introductory speech, but it is up to the Minister to say where he wants to take us. In 2012 I spoke about a ban on live exports, and just last year I supported the ten-minute rule Bill in favour of such a ban, so I am glad that we now seem to be a little closer to a ban becoming a reality. However, I feel that there has been some rowing back on some of the pronouncements that were made during the European Union referendum campaign.

For example, the current Foreign Secretary went down to Ramsgate and I thought that he announced in no uncertain terms that there would be a ban on live exports if we left the EU. I know from the emails I have received that there are people who were persuaded to vote leave simply because of that issue. Perhaps those are the sorts of emails I tend to get from people involved in the animal welfare movement. I tried my best to outline some of the reasons why I thought animal welfare might not benefit from Brexit, particularly if we consider the animal welfare and food safety standards that we might be forced to relinquish as part of a trade deal with the United States. However, many people were adamant and were convinced that a live export ban would be delivered almost overnight if we voted to leave.

It is now being said that such a ban is being considered as one of several options as we leave the EU. As the Minister is here today, I will point out that I asked a similar question about foie gras. At the moment, the production of foie gras is banned in this country, on the grounds that we believe it to be cruel, unnatural and something that we should not tolerate here. The line has always been that imports of foie gras cannot be prohibited, because the dastardly EU would not let us ban them. So one might think that, given we have already established our own moral position on this issue here in the UK, once we are free from the clutches of the EU a ban on imports would be the next step. However, the answer I have just received to my written parliamentary question is:

“Leaving the EU and the single market therefore provides an opportunity to consider whether the UK can adopt a different approach in future”.

To me, that sounds like equivocation taken to the nth degree, and I fear that the same might apply to live exports.

It is also somewhat disingenuous to suggest that such a ban on live exports was always on the Government’s wish list and that it just was not possible to achieve until we left the EU. Ministers who argued during the EU referendum campaign that we would get a live exports ban once we left the EU are members of a party and a Government who in 2012 were instrumental in stopping action at EU level—I think it was being led by Germany—that would have limited the journey time for live animals to below eight hours. In most cases that would have been tantamount to a ban on live exports from the UK. However, the UK went along to those discussions and argued against attempts to limit the hours.
I have raised this issue in a number of debates, including the recent debates on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, as it seems to me to be representative of the verbal and policy gymnastics that the Government have undertaken since the EU referendum, and nobody has come back to me and said that the UK did not take that stance. So let nobody be under the false illusion that we could have not taken significant action to limit —perhaps not ban, but limit—live transit times.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I believe that in 1992 it was a Conservative Government who sought to impose import restrictions, but they were challenged and overturned in the European Court of Justice, so this is something that a Conservative Government have tried to tackle in the past.

Kerry McCarthy: I am talking about 2012, which is far more recent than that, and as I said the Government went along to the negotiations and were not prepared to take the side of those who were arguing for an eight-hour limit.

It is important that the Government are held to account on what I see as a promise to end the practice of live animal exports that was made during the referendum campaign. That is because—as the petition rightly states, although I do not think we have heard quite enough about it this afternoon—the transport of live animals, no matter what the end result is, whether they are going for slaughter or for fattening up overseas, causes a huge amount of unnecessary suffering.

It is important not to forget the tragedy that jump-started the long-running campaign for a ban, which happened many years ago. In 1996 nearly 70,000 sheep were left to die either from heatstroke, suffocation, burning or drowning, after the ship that was carrying them caught fire in the middle of the Indian ocean. Although, thankfully, an incident on that scale has not happened again, countless animals continue to endure gruelling journeys every year.

In 2012, 40 sheep had to be euthanised after being crammed into a truck, and just last August it was reported that 500 sheep spent four days without any access to food or water while they were being transported to Turkey. Also, many people here will have seen today’s story in The Times about how every year more than 5,000 calves—unweaned and discarded by the dairy industry—are sent on journeys of more than 135 hours from Scotland to Spain. That number had doubled from the previous year; I think the 5,000 figure is from 2016.

Zac Goldsmith: The hon. Lady is making a very good speech and I just want to add one more point. I believe that in the past two years 20,000 calves have been sent to Spain. In Spain there is a requirement that a calf should be given bedding for only the first two weeks of its life and not beyond that, whereas a British calf has the right—if I can put it that way—to have bedding for six months. So the standards in Spain are dramatically lower than those in the UK, which is another reason why this issue is about not only whether an animal is going to be slaughtered, but the conditions in which it is living when it reaches its destination.

Kerry McCarthy: As is often the case—perhaps not on the wider Brexit issue, but on this specific issue—I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. Actually, that was a point I was going to make later in my speech: there is a big discrepancy between two weeks’ worth of bedding and six months’ worth of bedding. It is certainly something that we have to take into account.

As I was saying, I hope that the Minister can provide some clarity as to whether Scotland would be exempt from any ban on live exports that was introduced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I understand that that is the case. Fergus Ewing, the Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity, said this month that Scotland would not participate in such a ban, so I would also be interested to hear from the Scottish National party spokesperson whether the SNP will allow the export of veal calves to continue.

Although the number of live animals exported each year has fallen from millions to tens of thousands, tens of thousands of animals are potentially still enduring cruel, long and painful journeys. Even during routine trips, animals are often exposed to freezing or extremely hot temperatures, with a lack of adequate sustenance, dangerous overcrowding and injuries being common.

One particularly harrowing investigation found that thousands of cattle were being transported via ship, and the unweaned calves were simply being tossed overboard if they became too sickly or died. As was mentioned in The Times story about the veal calves today, with their 135-hour journeys, although there are rules about rest periods, for example on long journeys, that can simply mean that the trucks stop in laybys and the animals continue to be held in very hot and crowded conditions for another hour or so, which for them is really no rest period at all.

The Government continue to proclaim their global leadership in animal welfare and even talk about legislating for higher standards but, as has been touched on, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to enforce standards effectively when it comes to the current live transit. Even the EU, in its 2011 review, admitted that effective enforcement is near impossible. Whenever animals continue to be exported live, there will continue to be suffering and violations of welfare. Unfortunately, the EU review did not come up with any changes to the standards. It seemed almost to accept that cutting corners to save space and money will always be attractive for companies that transport live animals, which will always be to the detriment of the animals involved.

It has been mentioned, not least by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), that when animals are transported beyond the UK they move beyond the Government’s reach, into countries with much lower standards than ours, and not just far-flung countries but our closest neighbours, including Spain and France, as we have heard. Many UK sheep are sent to France, and a 2016 French National Assembly report concluded that there were serious and widespread welfare problems in French abattoirs. Members might have seen from recent parliamentary questions that I and others have tabled, or from The Guardian’s excellent “Animals farmed” series, that conditions in our own slaughterhouses and food production lines are not always as we might desire, but there is certainly widespread concern about overseas conditions also—we have already mentioned the situation...
in Spain. The problems are exacerbated by many animals being re-exported even further away, meaning that their re-packing is covered only by the standards of the country acting as the middleman, not by ours. It goes without saying that we cannot assume that after the animals have endured the awful journeys they will be killed quickly or humanely.

If the Government are serious about being known as a world leader in animal welfare, they must put their money where their mouth is and announce their clear commitment to banning the export of live animals, for slaughter or for further fattening. The Labour party has called for that in its recently published animal welfare plan, and for the Government to ensure an exemption for livestock crossing the border on the island of Ireland, with which I think everyone would agree.

Colin Clark: I have spoken about livestock moving the significant distances between the islands, from Orkney and Shetland and the islands on the west coast of Scotland. Does the hon. Lady accept that that transport reaches a standard with which she would be comfortable?

Kerry McCarthy: I cannot comment on the standard, as I have never looked into it, but I am happy to take the hon. Gentleman’s assurances—he is a fellow member of the Environmental Audit Committee. I was talking about exceptions outside the UK. We accept that live transit would continue to be allowed within the UK, but we also need to ensure that decent standards and proper monitoring are in place. The one exception would be across the land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland; I do not think anyone would argue that that should be subject to an export ban.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Once we leave the EU, we will completely lose control over the welfare standards of any animals that go from the UK into southern Ireland. Does the hon. Lady accept that those animals could continue their journey on to Spain or France?

Kerry McCarthy: If the hon. Gentleman wants to argue for not having live exports across the border from the north of Ireland to the Republic of Ireland, he is welcome to do so. This goes to a much wider issue that the Government have not yet managed to address: what do we do about the border between the north and the south once we leave the EU? Many people want it to continue in its current form, but the practicalities of leaving should mean that a hard border is established. That is one for the Government and perhaps not one that we in Westminster Hall can grapple with today, but the fact that we need to address the issue of animals being transported between the north and the south ought not to be used as an excuse for not addressing an export ban outside the British Isles.

Mr Carmichael: The difficulty with the hon. Lady’s argument is that we either ban exports or we do not. A ban is a ban, and she is arguing for a ban that is not a ban. As the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) says, once animals are in southern Ireland they can be exported anywhere.

Kerry McCarthy: If the right hon. Gentleman is arguing that we need a hard border with Ireland, which will then prevent us from implementing anything else we would desire to see in the future, he may do so, but I think we must consider that relationship a special case. We need to look at how many animals would go on in transit. The Minister perhaps can enlighten us on that, but I suspect that it is not a significant number.

I conclude by talking about something the Minister needs to advise us on, and that is World Trade Organisation agreements. Colleagues will be aware that under WTO agreements countries cannot, under normal circumstances, discriminate between trading partners. The principle is known as most favoured nation treatment, and in practice it means that the UK could not allow for the live export of animals to the Republic of Ireland while excluding the rest of the EU. Therefore, it is wholly possible that a ban on live animal exports could contravene WTO rules—a view shared by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, among others. Any WTO member can challenge another member on its trade policy, which could then be ruled as breaching the organisation’s rules.

However, as a member of the EU, the UK is already party to several trade bans that have never been challenged at the WTO, including the import ban on cosmetics tested on animals and the ban on fur produced from cats and dogs. When the Government consider their future options, they can look at the 2009 EU seal import ban as an example of how to pass the WTO test. I hope that the Minister can explain how he feels we will pass that test if we introduce at least a partial ban on exports.

Finally, I understand that the Command Paper for the Agriculture Bill might be published tomorrow—the Minister might like to enlighten us on that. It presents a perfect opportunity to introduce proposals to ensure that a ban comes into force as soon as possible after the UK leaves the EU. Both before and after leaving, the Government should push the European institutions and member states to strive for greater co-operation. I do not want us just to walk away from the problem. It is one thing to say, “When we leave the EU we can make our own rules; we can have standards that are truly excellent—gold-plated.” I do not want us to walk away from the EU, full stop. I would like us to remain a member and be able to influence animal welfare standards across the continent, but even if we cannot, we still need to use what influence we have and what trade discussions we are having to try to ensure that those standards that are not what we would like to see, in France and Spain and further afield, are improved.

We have an opportunity to improve animal welfare. I said at the start of my speech that Brexit offers very few opportunities, but if we are to leave the EU I hope that the Minister seizes this one and does something to ensure the better welfare of animals for years to come.
we are leaving the European Union, as are my constituents, and one of the biggest beneficiaries will be the animal kingdom. My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and I, for 35 years, have consistently championed animal welfare measures in this place. For a while, it seemed that we were rather few in numbers on our side of the House, which could have been because many Conservative Members represented farming communities. When I was Member of Parliament for Basildon I had 28 farms in my constituency; now I am the Member for Southend West I have no farms, so there are no farmers lobbying me. I understand that if a Member from any party has a farming community in their constituency this is possibly not an easy issue to consider, but as far as I am concerned, we can judge life generally on the way in which we treat animals. Mrs Lorraine Platt and others, through the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, have absolutely transformed the way in which colleagues—certainly Conservative Members—see these matters.

From 1997 to 2010, a number of animal welfare organisations supported the Labour party with their money, but as far as I am concerned the only good thing that Tony Blair did was ban foxhunting. On all other animal welfare measures, he let the British people down badly. I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for the marvellous reception he gave in the Jubilee Room a short while ago celebrating pasties, and I am delighted that we have a Minister who is doing a splendid job on animal welfare. His boss, the Secretary of State—he was an outstanding Secretary of State for Education, too—is saying everything that I and my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet have wanted to hear for so many years. I hope that more and more colleagues who are joining the campaign will support the Minister and the Secretary of State in their mission.

As the hon. Member for Bristol East said, in 2012 we took part in a debate on animal welfare exports. At the time, live animal export numbers were dwindling, and I held out hope that a future debate on the subject would not be necessary. It is obvious that the industry has grown again since then. I associate myself with the views of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. I know the RSPCA has had a number of internal difficulties, but as long as Lady Stockton remains the rest of their short lives in barren pens. Such cases exemplify why the RSPCA is rightly calling for an end to the long-distance transport of live animals in favour of a carcase-only trade.

It is such a shame that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, has left his place, because there are some things that concern me slightly.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I completely agree with my hon. Friend that it is preferable to move all meat on the hook rather than on the hoof. There are long journeys up and down the backbone of the United Kingdom—it is not just about the distance involved with exports into Europe. There is a serious problem with the geographical spread of abattoirs not only in England, but in the devolved regions. We need to get a better spread of abattoirs, bringing them closer to the markets and thereby allowing us to shorten journeys.

Sir David Amess: I understand what my hon. Friend is saying. There are a number of Scottish Members here. I am not an expert in abattoirs, and I need to reflect on precisely how he thinks we should deal with that matter, but I understand. He represents constituents, however, who would feel that the issue is not so straightforward.

Mr Jack: I am on my hon. Friend’s side.

Sir David Amess: Yes. The RSPCA is lobbying for a maximum journey time of eight hours for all animals travelling for slaughter or further fattening across the European Union. I am sure that many like-minded colleagues will join me in supporting that initiative.

Another reason why it is right to pursue the end of live exports is that even if we manage to transport live animals effectively and safely, we cannot ensure that the countries animals arrive in live up to our high standards. We have wonderful standards in this country—I challenge anyone to find better in the EU. Of the 28 members of the European Union, it is this great country of ours that has the highest standards possible. That is why, when we leave the wretched European Union next March, we will improve standards even further.
Bill Wiggin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about leaving the EU, but he is not right about our standards. Listening to the anecdotal evidence of the people who watch the lorries going from Ramsgate, they complain that inspections are not rigorous enough. We can do a lot more here.

Sir David Amess: I am not going to fall out with my hon. Friend on this issue, particularly as he is a tropical fish fancier, but the Minister will have heard what he said. When the Minister sums up the debate, he will put my hon. Friend right on his criticism of how these things are managed.

The fundamental problem with the current EU regulations is a lack of political willpower in member states to enforce them. That does not just relate to animal welfare; that lack of willpower applies to so many other dealings with the EU. In November 2016, Sweden, with the support of Denmark, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, presented a paper to the EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council highlighting numerous examples of infringements and a general lack of enforcement. For example, Compassion in World Farming has found that we export approximately 40,000 live sheep for slaughter to the continent each year. France takes a considerable number of these, yet it was only in 2016 that an inquiry by a committee of the French National Assembly found there to be serious concerns about welfare standards in French abattoirs. Is that something that our nation of animal lovers would be proud to be associated with? I think not.

More locally, veterinary costs are of concern to many constituents. Goodness me, vet bills seem to grow weekly. There are a lot of senior citizens in the area I represent—we have the most centenarians in the country, and I hope to be one of them one day. Animals are their lives. They are everything to elderly people who are on their own, and we should not trivialise the importance of animals to such people. Veterinary bills can be high, and the taxpayer foots the bill for veterinary checks in live transportation. If that cost was shifted to those involved in the industry, not only would the taxpayer save money during these hard times, but the industry would be incentivised to look after its animals well, as the cost of veterinary bills could be high.

I hope I have convinced the House about the issue of the live export of animals. Some 94,000 people signed the petition. What is particularly exciting is that unlike in 2012, the change I want is no longer an impossible dream. When we investigated a ban before, it was found that because of freedom of movement within the European Union, it would be unlawful to stop the practice. Once we leave the European Union, our hands were tied behind our back—it would be impossible to do anything about it. When the Minister for North Herefordshire said, and prevent the public purse from paying for veterinary costs. Let us make this issue one of the first great steps as Britain takes back control from the European Union. As Gandhi once said:

“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”

As we leave the European Union next year, not only I and many of my constituents but the whole of the animal kingdom will be celebrating.

5.22 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who I think is wrong about rural as opposed to urban communities. We have only to listen to the RSPCA to hear about unspeakable acts of vicious cruelty that take place against domestic animals in our urban areas to know that cruelty is not divided by region, people or nations, but by wickedness in individuals. It is absolutely the road to hell to ban things because we do not like the proper process that should be followed. I am particularly passionate about this because my amendment to the Animal Welfare Act 2006 would have seen the sentence for cruelty increased, but it was voted down by the Labour Government who took the credit for the Bill.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West for revealing my fondness for tropical fish, although I am not sure that they are completely relevant in this debate as they tend to be flown in from Singapore on very long journeys. However, the problem with a ban is that we are all here because we want to see less bad treatment and better treatment of animals in transit, irrespective of where they are coming from or going to and irrespective of whether they are for slaughter or for breeding stock.

I had to pass exams to be allowed to transport my animals. It is wrong to say that there are not rules on what we are allowed to do. There is an eight-hour limit. We have to have tests and we can drive our animals only within 65 km of where we live without any regulation whatsoever. So what the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said is wrong. She should look it up on the DEFRA website.

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Gentleman has just said that I said there were not any rules, but I said nothing of the sort. I accepted that there are rules in place, but I
said that they are not being adhered to. For example, calves being held in a truck in a lay-by technically counts as a rest period, but most of us would agree that is not much of a relief for them. I did not say that there were not any rules.

Bill Wiggin: I thought the hon. Lady said that we tried to object to the eight-hour limit in the European Union.

Kerry McCarthy: That is an overall limit.

Bill Wiggin: I have given the matter a great deal of thought and it occurs to me that we should not ban live exports. If we do that, we will lose control through the Irish border and the animals whose welfare we seek to improve could end up travelling from southern Ireland to Spain or France on journeys that are considerably longer than they need to be. We need to improve the standards of transport within the United Kingdom, and when they arrive in Kent ready to cross the channel they must be properly inspected by vets. That means there needs to be lairage and unloading of the animals, and they need to be checked. Then they should be loaded into approved-only transporters. There are penalties for any suffering that happens on the journeys, but at the moment there is not an owner.

The lorry driver is not the owner of the animals in the back, so if a sheep’s leg is sticking out of the back of the truck, nobody suffers financially for that. If one of the animals is found to be suffering when they are unloaded, it gets put down and then there is a penalty, because that life is lost and that animal is no longer fit for human consumption. The whole purpose of its export has been taken away. That is the penalty that hangs over all livestock producers all the time. If someone is found to have put the wrong medicines in their animal, it is condemned. That is how we deal with and enforce rules.

If we have proper policing all the way along the transport route, it is perfectly reasonable to continue to send animals 22 miles over the seas as opposed to thousands of miles around the edge.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I think my hon. Friend has missed the entire point of the debate. The point is not that animals should be transported under good conditions, but whether they should be slaughtered, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) said in opening the debate, as close to the point of production as possible and exported on the hook and not on the hoof. In that context, it is immaterial how they travel within the United Kingdom. There are 135 hours between the Scottish islands and Spain, and that is unacceptable under any circumstances. It is the principle that we object to, not the quality of the export.

Bill Wiggin: I hate to disagree with my hon. Friend, but if he reads the petition, he will see that it states:

“The transport of live animals exported from the UK causes immense suffering.”

So he is wrong. It is not about whether we kill the animals near to where they are born. We all agree on that: of course we should slaughter and export on the hook. If we cannot, or if something else is going on, such as fattening, we have to be careful, because large numbers of animals will be put in lorries for breeding purposes and they will arrive in France and be slaughtered, and there is nothing we can do. So we ought to correct where the suffering occurs and not try to blame foreign people for standards that they may or may not be more passionate about than some of our people.

It is much more important that the Government focus on removing any suffering on the journeys that we can control.

Zac Goldsmith: Does my hon. Friend think it is possible to transport in a civilised manner very young calves from the Scottish isles to Spain, for example? Obviously anything is possible in a world of fantasy, but in the real world does he believe that is a possibility?

Bill Wiggin: At the moment we have got the worst possible case where the roll-on/roll-off ferries will not take live exports because of the protests, so the animals end up going on slower ferries. Can we export and travel safely? Yes, we can. We fly racehorses around the world to appear in horseraces. We do all sorts of things with animals, but the purpose of the Animal Welfare Act was to name the five freedoms so that we would have basic frameworks for animal welfare, and breaking those is against the law. It is vital that we enforce the laws that we all like and support, rather than allow exporters an excuse. So can we transport calves abroad? Yes, we can.

Zac Goldsmith: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. Surely if one were even to come close to applying the standards applied to racehorses, or to extremely valuable breeding stock, to animals that are transported for slaughter or fattening, the whole economic dynamic would change to such an extent that it would never make sense to transport animals on a large scale for those purposes? The standards for animals transported for slaughter or fattening will always necessarily be far lower than those in the example that he provided.

Bill Wiggin: It is far better to achieve a ban by making it economically difficult because the standards are so high than to apply a legal ban, which people get around by sending their animals to Northern Ireland, southern Ireland and to Spain. Let us get what we really want, which is a reduction in cruelty, rather than an export ban.

Theresa Villiers: In my ten-minute rule Bill, I proposed an exemption for north-south exports on the island of Ireland, so long as there was no onward transport overseas. My hon. Friend sees this as a great flaw in the proposal of a ban, but there is a technical solution that deals with the flaw that he has identified.

Bill Wiggin: It did not stop horsemeat getting into our supermarkets either, and that is the problem. Once we lose control, because the animal is in another sovereign nation, it is out of our hands. Therefore, let us get right the bit that we can. At the moment, a ban would fail. We would get illegal activity and, in the end, promote and improve the lot of the worst people—not the most caring people, such as those who are prepared to be hauliers who are properly policed, have proper veterinary inspections and will lose their licence to be an approved
haulier if there is any case of abuse. That is how we can achieve what we really want, which is better animal welfare. I hope that if we can do that, the roll-on/roll-off ordinary ferries will allow proper, speedy channel crossings, rather than the slow boats that animals currently have to take. However, that cannot happen without better enforcement by British veterinary inspectors, and they cannot achieve that in Ramsgate because there is no lairage. If the animals are not taken off the trucks, they cannot be inspected properly. If they cannot be seen, they cannot be given the proper veterinary inspections, and if we do not do that, we will not get the improvements that we all want.

Sir Roger Gale: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; he is being very generous. He just said that once the animals leave these shores we have no control over them. He is absolutely right, and that is precisely why we do not leave these shores, because we have no control over them. He is being very generous. He just said that once the animals are in Europe, they are out of our sphere of influence, it has gone. Equally, when animals come into the UK, they fall into our sphere of influence, and we must ensure that we have properly resourced policing, and the standards that we hope to achieve in this well-intentioned bill, I think, slightly vulnerable petition.

Bill Wiggin: Unfortunately for my hon. Friend, that will not be possible, because we are not proposing an export ban on all animals, but just on those that are for slaughter—and how will anyone know whether they are for slaughter? Who can tell what will happen to a sheep after it has arrived in France? It may be breeding stock that is downgraded to fattening, and then downgraded to immediate slaughter. Once it is out of our sphere of influence, it has gone. Equally, when animals come into the UK, they fall into our sphere of influence, and we must ensure that we have properly resourced policing, and the standards that we hope to achieve in this well-intentioned bill, I think, slightly vulnerable petition.

5.33 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I would hazard a guess that, unusually, this afternoon’s petition is probably supported by the vast majority of UK citizens. I noted that one of the areas with the greatest density of replies, as we can see from the information published by the House, was South Thanet, and for good reason. Part of South Thanet has been mentioned in the debate: the very small commercial port of Ramsgate, which is part of my constituency. It has the very dubious honour, which I want to get rid of as soon as possible, of being the only UK port through which lamb and sheep are transported across an international sea border for slaughter abroad.

If the inappropriate means of transport across the channel—up to three hours on a small, ageing Russian tank transporter called the Joline, which plied the Volga river in a previous incarnation and is now Latvian-flagged—is not bad enough, we should also be concerned about the long journey times within the UK. The sheep and lambs are often from Cumbria, meaning an eight to 10 hour trip to Kent. The onward journey, after three hours travelling across the channel, could be to somewhere as far as Germany, which would take another eight hours or more, after which they are slaughtered. We are talking about a transport time—without mentioning the problems that we have already heard about regarding veal—for lambs of 24 hours in total. Although exports through Ramsgate can be at any time of year—in winter cold or summer heat—peaks are often seen to coincide with religious festivals, notably Eid, following the end of Ramadan.

The issue of animal exports out of Ramsgate gained national focus because of a truly appalling fiasco on 12 September 2012, as has been mentioned this afternoon. A single lorry carrying 43 sheep, without any official lairage, was declared unfit to travel. Temporary holding pens were set up, as no official lairage was available at the port. Some 43 sheep had to be euthanised due to injury, six fell into the water, and two drowned. Breaches of animal welfare regulations were found, and appropriate fines and a suspended prison sentence were levied against the director of the transport company. Thereafter, Thanet District Council unilaterally suspended the trade through the municipally owned and run port. However, following an injunction by the shippers, the trade was forced to resume again the next month, in late October 2012.

A petition was presented to Parliament in January 2013 by the then MP Laura Sandys, calling for the permanent suspension of live exports through the port. Things then became truly weird, with protracted legal action by the shippers—action that concluded in February 2014, resulting in a claim of more than £4 million in compensation against the local council. It is a small council, so local taxpayers had to bear that cost. Live animal exports could not be prevented in what was a very telling judgment for two reasons. First, section 33 of the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 allows, in simple terms, free access to goods traffic from any UK port—an historical law that was more appropriate. I would argue, in the age of oil and steam, when navigation was more hazardous. For that reason, I sought to introduce a fairly simple amendment to the old Act via a ten-minute rule Bill in May 2016. My Bill would have allowed municipally owned and controlled ports the discretion to ban the trade. In Ramsgate, it is certainly not a trade that people want through the port, which they own.

In some ways, that Bill was a little bit of devilment, because even if it had passed at that time, it would have been deemed not in accordance with single market rules on the functioning of the EU. That was clearly highlighted in the second part of the High Court judgment, which stated that in any event, notwithstanding the 1847 Act, EU law governing the function of the single market would prevent restrictions of animal exports. I note what the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, but the EU interprets animals as mere “goods”. EU rules still allow the production of foie gras, the existence of veal crates, bullfighting and everything else. I do not think that EU standards are the gold plate that many people see them as.

It was encouraging to see, a couple of weeks ago—and somewhat late in the day, I might add—the Labour party publish its proposals for animal welfare. I warmly welcomed them, but they largely mirrored what we on the Conservative Benches are doing and have been talking about for some time. The Leader of the Opposition spoke today about maintaining membership of “a” or “the” customs union, and maintaining rules and standards very much in alignment with those of the EU, so that we end up in some perpetual membership of the single market. I am afraid that that was where the credibility of Labour’s position on animal welfare somewhat fell to bits in my mind. An independent country could be able to introduce the welfare standards it feels are right, but single market rules have thus far failed us on animal and farming standards.
[Craig Mackinlay]

Just a month ago, I held an event on the parliamentary estate—just next door—with representatives of key animal welfare groups, many of whom are here, and a diverse range of celebrities, including Joanna Lumley, Frederick Forsyth, Sir Ranulph Fiennes, Selina Scott and Jan Leeming. I was pleased to be supported by Conservative colleagues, but there was also support from Members of the Scottish National party—I was grateful that they were at the event. Sadly, not one Labour Member came, and I am somewhat intrigued about that. I am also somewhat intrigued about the fact that the Labour Benches are virtually devoid this afternoon.

Kerry McCarthy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Craig Mackinlay: Of course—I am surprised that the hon. Lady has waited so long.

Kerry McCarthy: I did get an invite to that event—I think I was actually speaking at something else that afternoon—but I thought I had been sent it accidentally, because I thought it was Conservative animal welfare event, especially given some of the names that were mentioned. I did not go because I thought I had somehow accidentally got on to the hon. Gentleman’s mailing list, but he should not assume from that any lack of support for the cause.

Craig Mackinlay: I am sorry if there was anything in the invitation that put the hon. Lady off, but it was very much open to all, and some other parties took up the offer.

We live in changed times. We voted to leave the European Union, which means leaving the customs union and the single market and no longer being bound by the EU’s acquis in areas where we wish to diverge. That gives me great hope. We have the opportunity to advance new international trade deals, and for the first time in a generation we are free once more to do what is right and what the people of this country demand. That very much comes under the banner of taking back control, which means taking back control of animal welfare and farming standards.

I and other Members have mentioned the encouraging words in the Conservative party manifesto by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other agriculture Ministers. I fully supported the Live Animal Exports (Prohibitions) Bill proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), and I pay tribute to the 94,000 people who signed this petition. I feel that they will share my view that, post Brexit, we can have a connection to the land and the livestock industry. Fewer and fewer children and adults have a connection to the land and the livestock industry. Growing up in the countryside, I was well aware of livestock farming. Fewer and fewer children and adults have a connection to the land and the livestock industry.

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I fully appreciate farmers’ concerns about the potential for increased costs, which were ably set out by my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin). He must feel like he is in “12 Angry Men”—one of my favourite films—but I am not sure he is going to win today. The increased costs resulting from the application of the standards that my hon. Friend ably set out may stop this trade in its tracks. The profit from the difference between the farm-gate cost and the price that the farmer receives when the animals are delivered to the market abroad will no longer be realised.

Bill Wiggin: Economic pressure is a far better way of achieving what my hon. Friend wants than legislative pressure. If it does not make economic sense, that is absolutely fine. What is wrong is that, without that potential outlet, supermarkets will simply screw down the price in the UK, and there will be nothing anybody can do. That is where the frustration comes from.

Craig Mackinlay: My hon. Friend made his points very well during his speech, and I was very pleased to hear them.

Let me put the size of the export market in context. Some 14.5 million sheep and lambs are slaughtered in this country each year, and a mere 40,000 are transported across the international sea border through ports such as Ramsgate in my constituency. It is a minor trade and alternatives are available. I have no intention—I say this now, but I suppose things change—of stopping my consumption of meat. I can think of nothing better than a decent Welsh or Kent salt marsh lamb, but the slaughter must be undertaken as close to where the animals are raised as possible. That means, post Brexit, having a national rethink about localising slaughterhouses. We need the Animal and Plant Health Agency to up its game on monitoring, particularly for long-distance transports within the UK. The rule that we should all be aiming for is that our meat should be provided on the hook, not on the hoof.

5.44 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson.

Animal cruelty always raises passions. I have been involved in farming my entire life, and I have grown up with animal husbandry since I was a little boy. My earliest memories are of inspecting livestock in fields and buildings, no matter the snow or rain. Many farm children help raise cattle or sheep as a project to get them involved in farming. Rural schools in Scotland used to raise funds for the school through family farms, which raised livestock from calves or lambs to be sold at the auction mart.

Rural children grow up surrounded by livestock—farm visits were not contrived, and are still an everyday activity—but society has become disconnected from livestock farming. Fewer and fewer children and adults have a connection to the land and the livestock industry. Growing up in the countryside, I was well aware of where the bacon, eggs, chicken or beef on my plate came from, but I am afraid to say that the vast majority of young adults do not realise where their burgers come from. My young sons are six and two and a half, and they know only too well that their sausages come from pigs, that their burgers come from fat cattle in the fields, and that the chicken in their night-time books are the roost chicken at the weekend. This debate should not be about the morality of eating meat. I respect the opinions of vegetarians, but I resent it if they peddle a myth that eating meat is cruel or unhealthy. This debate should not be about that.

Let us be clear: husbandry, the feeding of livestock, the use of veterinary drugs and the transport of animals are regulated. The care of commercial livestock is paramount to farmers and breeders. We must not confuse this issue with the incidence of neglect, wanton cruelty
or, in the case of transport, law-breaking. If we disagree with transporting livestock, it must be for reasons that all of society can agree on, and not simply because of minority beliefs.

NFU Scotland recognises that the standards of transport and slaughter in the EU are equivalent to our standards. Livestock are regularly shipped, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) knows, from the islands to mainland Scotland—to Aberdeen on the east coast from Orkney and Shetland. Several years ago, specialist roll on/roll off containers were manufactured by Stewart Trailers, which happens to be based in my constituency of Gordon. They were designed specifically for long journeys, and they had water and were well ventilated. They were designed to be stable if the crossing is choppy—as the right hon. Gentleman knows, the crossing from Shetland and Orkney can be very choppy.

There is a lairage yard at Aberdeen for safe onward transportation to farms in the fertile countryside of north-east Scotland, where I farm. That is best practice, and anyone visiting the facilities and the cattle and sheep auctions would be reassured that it can be done properly. There was a tremendous TV programme, which can still be found, called “The Mart”. Hon. Members may need subtitles, as it was in Doric, which those of us in the north-east can speak. It was about a mart called Thainstone, and it was a wonderful example of livestock husbandry. Anybody watching it would be hard pressed to say that people who look after livestock are not passionate about it; they are therefore concerned about this debate.

If somebody simply does not agree with shipping livestock or eating meat, this proposal will not be good enough. The NFUS is very concerned that any attempt to prevent live export will set a dangerous precedent. Livestock production is the key to farming on Scotland’s islands, because they cannot grow wheat, broccoli or the fine fruit and vegetables grown in the Kent constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay).

The NFUS said:

“If a precedent is set against permitting animals to undergo ferry journeys based on sentiment, not science, island crossings could be easily targeted...despite the absence of welfare problems on these crossings”.

It is important for us to separate the issues, and I am grateful to the Labour hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who said that she respected the fact that there are higher standards in the UK.

This is the nub of the matter: can exporting over the sea be done properly? Yes, it can. Can it be done with no suffering to animals, given the correct equipment and facilities? Yes, it can. Should concern be shown for higher temperatures in the summer and the length of transportation? Yes, it should. Should this be stopped because of poor practice in the past or internationally? No.

Time after time, we witness on our television programmes the other issue on livestock for slaughter in the EU, and many other Members have mentioned it: illegal slaughter techniques, cruelty and in many cases simple criminality—facilities that should not be allowed and personnel who enjoy being cruel to animals. Abattoirs in the EU where that happens should simply not be operating. Several Members have mentioned that, and I am passionate about it, but it should not be confused with what the debate is about. The industry has to think again about this.

At the weekend, I was delighted to speak at the 53rd dinner of the Institute of Auctioneers and Appraisers in Scotland. The institute kindly gave me a tie, which I apparently took ownership by other means as well—but I do not wish to cast any slur on his character. The auctioneers are also responsible for being aware of legislation and ensuring that all those who use their facilities comply with the veterinary drug use, husbandry and transport regulations. They are very much the gatekeepers.

I believe that as many people are concerned about where livestock are processed on the continent as are worried about the transportation. On that point I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said. The whole industry must satisfy the public’s concern about where livestock is destined for. The industry cannot simply load the livestock and forget about them; Members have mentioned that. In the UK, we are broadly satisfied with Government inspectorates and officials inspecting our facilities, and the Department for Environment and Rural Affairs recently announced that abattoirs—in England, at least—will have cameras, but I suggest that the livestock industry consider a code of practice, or an addition to its industry standards, on being aware of the destination of livestock that are exported live.

Livestock and valuable horses are very tightly regulated, and the destination of valuable breeding stock is known, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) said. Lower value livestock can end up being passed from pillar to post, but that should not be the case, and this is where auctioneers could shed a great deal of light. Horses and ponies sent to the continent for processing should be an area of shame for horse lovers. Surplus horses have to be dealt with humanely, even in a country where we do not consume horse meat. With recent royal support, it has been advocated that facilities should be provided in the UK, rather than horses being transported to the continent. I absolutely agree with that. If the industry were to produce its own code of practice on the destination of exported livestock, and facilities were verified as suitable, I personally would be a lot more comfortable.

The Minister should look to best practice, and he is very welcome to visit farms in the north of Scotland and the facilities at Aberdeen docks. I am sure that the Member for the islands, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, would invite the Minister as well, although I recommend that he takes a plane and not the ferry; the crossing is very choppy.
I recognise the passion of those who signed the petition, but I doubt they wanted it to be the thin end of a wedge undermining UK farming, which at the moment has the highest welfare standards in the EU.

5.54 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, and to take part in a debate on such an important issue.

The export of live farm animals can cause great suffering in many cases, as was outlined by a number of right hon. and hon. Members, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and for Southend West (Sir David Amess), and the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). Last year I proposed a ten-minute rule Bill to implement a ban on the export of live animals for slaughter or for fattening, because I believe it to be unethical to export animals to countries where they can be subjected to treatment that would be unlawful in the United Kingdom.

I am concerned, as are many others who have spoken this afternoon, that the rules regulating the transport and slaughter of animals that are supposed to apply across every EU member state are not always effectively enforced in every part of the European Union once animals leave this country. Many of the sheep exported from the UK are sent to France, but there is clear evidence of inhumane and illegal slaughter practices in a number of places there—a problem acknowledged in a 2016 report by a committee of inquiry in the French Parliament. In my view, that of the people who signed the petition, and that of many of my constituents, it is not acceptable for the UK to send animals to die in such inhumane conditions.

We have had extensive discussion about calves that are exported from Scotland to Spain, and are subjected to a 20-hour sea journey to northern France, and then a drive all the way to Spain. The total journey time can be as much as 135 hours. Morbidity and mortality following transport can be high, and those that survive to reach their destination in Spain can, under the law prevailing there, be kept in barren pens, without bedding, which would be illegal in this country.

Over the years, there have been repeated calls for this harsh trade to be brought to an end. Public concern on the issue dates back nearly 100 years. The 1990s saw mass protests by thousands of dedicated campaigners seeking an end to live exports, but attempts to implement a ban have been blocked by the European Court of Justice as being in contravention of EU law and single market rules on the free movement of goods.

Now that the UK has voted to leave the European Union, we have the opportunity to reopen the question and to decide in this House whether to implement a ban. Although export bans are constrained by World Trade Organisation rules, the WTO appellate body has ruled that animal welfare matters are capable of falling within the "public morals" exception. There are reasonable grounds to believe that the UK would be able to defend a WTO challenge by showing an export ban to be a proportionate response to long-standing, deeply held concerns of the public in the United Kingdom, as illustrated by those many thousands of people who took the time to sign the petition we are debating.

The WTO is not the only potential barrier to delivering an end to live exports, as called for by those who signed the petition. We will only be able to end them if we leave the single market; if we do not, a ban will continue to be beyond this country’s reach, as it has been for so many years. That is another important reason to respect the result of the referendum and leave the single market, replacing it with a new partnership with our European neighbours.

I understand from my discussions with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, for which I am very grateful, that the Government intend to consult soon on how implement the Conservative manifesto promise that we will "take early steps to control the export of live farm animals for slaughter".

I appeal to the Minister to publish that consultation, and to ensure that the options considered include a ban on export for slaughter or for fattening. Like the hon. Member for Bristol East and my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, I think that if we are to tackle the welfare concerns highlighted by hon. Members, the ban needs to include exports for fattening as well.

I believe, as others do, that there is a case for allowing exports to continue from north to south, from Northern Ireland. That is essentially local traffic, and I do not think that it raises the same animal welfare concerns. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), if we genuinely want an end to live exports, we are justified in stating that the exemption for north-south exports should not allow onward transportation to destinations outside the Republic of Ireland.

I would be very interested to hear from the Minister about the status of an export ban in the United Kingdom as a whole. There have been reports in recent days that the devolved institutions in different parts of the United Kingdom would make their own decisions on this matter, but one would have thought that as a trade matter it would be reserved to the UK Government. It would be useful to have the Minister’s view on that. I am also concerned that there are reports that the Minister for rural affairs in the Scottish Government, Minister Ewing, has indicated that he would not support a ban of this sort. I hope that that view may change.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Does the right hon. Lady accept that that is a matter for the devolved Scottish Government, and not for Members in this House?

Theresa Villiers: Actually, the question I am posing to the Minister is about whether it is a reserved matter. Whether it is a matter for the Scottish Government or the UK Government, I want to see an end to live exports, because of the suffering that they cause.

It would be very helpful to hear from the Minister when he expects the consultation to be published. I very much hope that it will come out in time for the outcome potentially to be included in the forthcoming Bill on farming, to which the Government are committed. I accept that it is probably too late for a provision on live exports to be in the Bill when it is first presented to...
Parliament, but I hope it is not too late for the outcome of the consultation on restricting live exports possibly to be added to the Bill through amendment at a later stage. I appeal to the Minister to move forward with the consultation, with a view to ensuring that it is published and completed in time to enable the Government, if they so choose, to add provisions banning live exports to the agriculture Bill before it finishes its passage through Parliament.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I have listened to the debate intensely, but I still have not got an answer on the issue of a trade deal between Northern Ireland and the Republic, to which live animals can be exported, and which is a member of the European Union. How do we control where animals go from there? We have absolutely no jurisdiction over that. We have to be consistent if we want to bring in something, and it is not consistent to say, “Once it goes to the Republic of Ireland, it is not our business.”

Theresa Villiers: There are still risks that the rules we put in place will not be enforced, but that is a reason to make sure that we do everything we can to ensure that they are enforced properly. If we bring in the ban that is advocated in my ten-minute rule Bill, exporting from north to south in Northern Ireland with a view to onward export to other jurisdictions would be unlawful. Obviously, it would be very important to seek to ensure that that aspect of the new legislation was enforced. Just because there are potential difficulties in enforcing some aspects of a ban does not mean that we should throw up our hands and say, “It’s impossible—we can’t do this.” The case has been strongly made for a ban, and we need to look very carefully at how we can make sure that we enforce it as effectively as possible.

Bill Wiggin: My concern is that if the price of sheep went up significantly in France, anybody who wanted to capitalise on that would send their sheep through southern Ireland; at that point, our ban would have made the capitalise on that would send their sheep through southern Ireland, it is not our business.”

Theresa Villiers: There are still risks that the rules we put in place will not be enforced, but that is a reason to make sure that we do everything we can to ensure that they are enforced properly. If we bring in the ban that is advocated in my ten-minute rule Bill, exporting from north to south in Northern Ireland with a view to onward export to other jurisdictions would be unlawful. Obviously, it would be very important to seek to ensure that that aspect of the new legislation was enforced. Just because there are potential difficulties in enforcing some aspects of a ban does not mean that we should throw up our hands and say, “It’s impossible—we can’t do this.” The case has been strongly made for a ban, and we need to look very carefully at how we can make sure that we enforce it as effectively as possible.

Theresa Villiers: I do not accept that that would be a consequence. It is possible to put together a legal formulation that contains an exemption from the ban for north-south exports within the island of Ireland. Enforcement would not necessarily be easy, but even if there were risks of the ban being evaded, that is not an excuse for inaction.

That is why I support an end to live exports. The case for a ban has been made clear by many campaigning organisations, such as Compassion in World Farming, the RSPCA, the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation and World Horse Welfare. The time has come to put an end to this trade that causes so much suffering. We should put a prohibition on live export in statute now, so that it comes into effect on exit day, when the United Kingdom leaves the European Union.

6.5 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on introducing the debate. I want to touch on a number of issues very briefly, and to deal with a couple of the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin). I normally agree with him, but on this occasion there is clearly a little difference between us.

Let us tackle the fundamental difference between live animals for slaughter, live animals for fattening and live animals for breeding stock. We all understand what “live animals for fattening” means—that is what the petition is about. My understanding is that “live animals for fattening” is a euphemism for exporting livestock from the United Kingdom to France, Spain, Italy or Greece, where they spend a couple of days in a field and are then slaughtered and branded as local meat, be that French, Spanish, Greek or Italian. Effectively, those animals are live animals for slaughter. My view is that any control exercise should embrace those animals, as well as those that are openly and honestly—if that is the right word—exported for slaughter.

Breeding stock is different. Rather like the racehorses that were referred to earlier, they are high-value animals, they are well looked after and they are transported with great care. That is not the case with animals that are exported for other purposes. The standards in the United Kingdom may occasionally be not too bad, but the standards in mainland Europe are unenforced and unenforceable. In theory they are supposed to be high, but in practice, as we all know, they are not. I am not satisfied that even a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce travelling with one animal, particularly a calf, from a Scottish island to the Scottish mainland for eight hours—if that is how long it takes—would be satisfactory.

The issue of veal calves, which has been referred to on a number of occasions, sadly arises from a pyrrhic victory that some of us thought we had won: the banning of veal crates in the United Kingdom. That simply proves that we do not solve a problem by moving it from A to B. That is as true of the testing of cosmetics on live animals as it is of this issue of veal calves. The British market has singularly failed to promote and sell rose veal, as it is known. Veal calves that were raised in the United Kingdom are being shipped under appalling conditions, for very many hours, from Scotland or wherever to mainland Europe, where they are reared in the dark and fed on milk under infinitely worse conditions than they ever had in the United Kingdom. [Interuption.] My hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire says that he has made it worse, and he is absolutely right—I said it was a pyrrhic victory. That has to be addressed, but not by shipping those animals to Europe to have them raised in sheds in Belgium, Holland, France or wherever, to produce white veal for Wiener schnitzel or whatever. We must consider that matter.

The crux of this issue—as it happens, this was highlighted on the BBC’s “Countryfile” yesterday—is the shortage of abattoir facilities, which arose way back when we shut half our abattoirs and slaughterhouses because we tried to gold-plate European regulations. We have heard that some facilities are no longer available, and that is absolutely right: we have taken away a lot of facilities, particularly in the Scottish islands. The answer, which I would like the Minister to address, is first to preserve local facilities where they still exist.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am a crofter who sells lambs every autumn because I run out of grazing. We have a slaughterhouse on the island, but slaughtering lambs at their different weights and then selling them on is beyond me—it is beyond
all crofters—because some are too small to be slaughtered. About half need to go away for further fattening. Even if we had more slaughterhouses, it would still not work. Lambs would still have to be exported off the island, or else there would be a bigger welfare problem: lack of food.

Sir Roger Gale: The hon. Gentleman has greater expertise in this narrow field than me, particularly since he farms. I accept that point, but I do not accept that it is necessary to send those animals to the south of England, which is an eight, 10 or 12-hour journey once they hit the mainland—and he first ships them from the island to the mainland United Kingdom. Even the journey to the south of Britain is very long, but if they are shipped across the channel and then halfway across Europe to Spain, which is what happens, the journey is infinitely longer. I do not accept that that is a necessity. I might accept that there is a case for moving them to the Scottish lowlands for fattening if that is what the economics of the trade demand.

I accept again that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and that the local abattoir might not work for everyone all the time. However, we have beset our slaughterhouses not with animal welfare regulations, which I support, but with all manner of other red tape, which is putting them out of business. The Minister needs to address that. Frankly, they are on the borderline of not being able to make a living. Far from closing those local facilities, we need to reinstate them and provide more local facilities so that, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay said, animals can be slaughtered as close to the point of production as possible. That is the key. That is why I do not accept the argument put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire that this is just a matter of raising transport standards and ensuring that everything is gold-plated in the United Kingdom. As he said himself—I made this point during his speech—the moment an animal leaves these shores, it is out of our control. I see no justification in this day and age for transporting animals alive rather than on the hook.

The Minister will know that people have said, “Ah yes, but the French have a different way of butchering meat.” That is absolutely true, but it is not beyond the wit of man—before we leave the European Union, at least—to hire a French butcher or someone else who can butcher for the French. In fact, it is already done. The idea that something can be shipped across the channel, spend a couple of days in a French field and be whacked off down to the Rungis meat market and sold as French beef, lamb or whatever is a nonsense.

I see no justification whatsoever for the transport of live animals for slaughter. I see every reason why we should take the opportunity, upon leaving the European Union, to ban the transport of live animals—that includes horses, by the way—for purposes other than breeding. I applaud the measures that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has trailed, and I hope very much that we will introduce them as soon as possible.

Despite our differences, there has been a large measure of agreement among Members. People have spoken about the need for abattoirs close to the source of production, and I have no problem agreeing with that. The abattoir in Orkney recently failed yet again, so that subject is near to my heart and, Orkney being an agricultural community, to those of my constituents. It also illustrates, though, how insisting on having a facility for slaughter near the point of production leaves people in island communities or even remote rural communities on the mainland open to unintended consequences.

Whatever position we have taken in the debate, I think we are all motivated by a desire to see the highest possible animal welfare standards. No one wants animals to suffer unnecessarily. The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said a few things with which I do not necessarily agree. He said that animals are not moody like people. I can only assume that he has never kept a cat. He also said that this is not an easy debate for those of us who represent agricultural communities, suggesting that we are not in a position to put animal welfare standards at the top of the agenda. I passionately disagree. I speak as a farmer’s son who represents an agricultural community. In fact, I should declare an interest given what he said about veterinary fees: my wife is a partner in a local veterinary practice in Orkney and regularly does pre-export checks for animals that go from Orkney to the continent. That does not happen often—the economics are such that live export for purposes other than slaughter, such as breeding, is not straightforward—but it does happen, and the cost of that is met by the exporter, not the taxpayer.

The assertion that farmers care less than other people about animal welfare has to be challenged. It simply is not the case. I invite the hon. Gentleman to cast his mind back to the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001, when he will have seen on his television set pictures of farmers who had had their entire herds slaughtered. Those were not people who did not care about the fate of the animals they had just seen destroyed; many of them suffer a measure of trauma to this day, and they are by no means untypical of farmers. In fact, although there are exceptions to every rule, they are typical. Farmers care about animal welfare. They invest a lot, not just financially but emotionally, in rearing beasts that they then send off for slaughter. That is a commercial activity, but it is by no means cold-hearted.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) explained the shipping of livestock from Orkney and Shetland to Aberdeen and spoke about the cassette system that is used to transport animals. I was first elected shortly before that system was put in place, and I recall that the construction and design of those cassettes was led by the farmers’ unions and farmers themselves, as well as by the State Veterinary Service and the animal welfare authorities. As he said, the system is the gold standard in animal transportation. If anyone feels, as the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) suggested, that transportation cannot be done humanely and with due regard for animal welfare, I invite them to come and inspect it. It is subject to the most rigorous standards and regulation, not just in its construction but in its operation.

As has been said, animal welfare export standards are currently subject to EC regulation 1/2005, which governs loading, unloading, journey length, vehicle standards,
temperature, and available food and water. Of course, those rules, like any, get broken from time to time—that is self-evident. That is why we have proper enforcement. If hon. Members are keen on seeing better enforcement, I look forward to their support when I next make a call for better resourcing and governance within the state veterinary service, because that has been allowed to wither on the vine for many years. If we are serious about animal welfare, that is somewhere we should put our money.

Sir Roger Gale: If I accept the idea of cruise liner facilities being offered for cattle shipped from the islands to the Scottish mainland—for the purpose of this argument, I do—will the right hon. Gentleman explain why it is then necessary to permit those animals to be transported to mainland Europe in conditions over which we have no control at all, for hundreds of miles and dozens of hours?

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman’s question prompts another question: what control is there to be within our domestic boundaries? It is still possible to transport animals for a very long time within the UK. He is right: there is a need for better enforcement across the whole European Union. Part of my unease about some of the arguments that he and others advance is that their attitude is almost, “Well, we’ll be fine—we’ll take the moral high ground and have the best possible standards of animal welfare.” That will not see the end of veal farming in France. That production will go on, but we somehow seem to think we can draw a line on the map and say, “We’re not going to be part of that.”

That also goes to the point I made earlier to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), to which we have not yet had an answer. A ban that does not ban movement across the Irish border is not a ban at all; it is a ban with a most obvious loophole. No matter what terms we may wish to write in about onward transmission, once the livestock has been moved from the north of Ireland to the south of Ireland we have lost control of it. As was said earlier—it might have been by the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin)—when market conditions dictate that a significantly better price is to be had for a product in France, that is where it will go. If there is even only one route to that market, that is the one route that will be taken.

Bill Wiggin: There is one other alternative. In that scenario, if we allowed live exports to continue, any animals coming from southern Ireland to France would cross through the United Kingdom, where our inspectors could significantly improve the quality of the transport.

Mr Carmichael: If the objection is to sea transportation, it strikes me as slightly ironic that one possible consequence for animals from Northern Ireland would be that, instead of crossing of a few miles across the border to the south, they would end up being put on boats to go across either the north channel or the Irish sea. Again, I fear the law of unintended consequences is at work here.

What is important? What should we be looking for as we seek to regulate this whole area better? I say to the Minister that in looking at this issue, which will constantly be under scrutiny, and rightly so, there is plenty of evidence and research. It is that evidence and research—not sentiment—that should ultimately govern the decisions that we make.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We come to the Front-Bench speeches, after which Steve Double will have a few minutes to sum up the debate. I call David Linden, for the Scottish National party.

6.25 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I commend the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. Before I move to the substance of my speech and the Scottish National party’s position, I will sum up the comments made by the right hon. and hon. Members who took part in the debate.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who is a passionate campaigner in this area, mentioned the Foreign Secretary’s visit to Ramsgate and the promise he made during the EU referendum campaign. I dare say that if it was not put on the side of a bus, it probably did not mean much.

During my time in this place the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) has spent an awful lot of time talking about Southend West. Last week I had the fortune—I was going to say misfortune—of having my flight to London diverted to Southend, and as we flew across I saw one or two of its farms. I am conscious that, as the Member for Glasgow East, I am probably the most urban MP taking part in the debate—I have a total of one farm in my constituency—but I was grateful for his contribution to the debate.

The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) is of course an experienced cattle farmer. There was little in the course of his speech that I could disagree with. As I listened to the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), I was further concerned: as a Scottish nationalist Member, it is unusual to find myself in agreement with Conservatives, but he made an excellent speech, nothing of which I could disagree with. I absolutely agree on the importance of teaching our children where food comes from. Like him, I have a son who is two and a half years old, and at the weekend I explained to him the benefits of us having both pig and cow in our pie. As children grow up, it is important that they understand where the food on our plate comes from. Alongside the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), he made a passionate defence of island communities. I was slightly disappointed that, over the course of the debate, island communities were not recognised elsewhere.

The hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), who is a passionate campaigner in this area, spoke of the experience in Ramsgate in 2012. I am afraid that we will probably disagree today. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) has introduced a ten-minute rule Bill. She discussed some of the challenges that could flow from World Trade Organisation rules and spoke about reasonable grounds. That does not give me the certainty I would need to give that support.

We also heard speeches from the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, who made a powerful
point about farmers and crofters. I am well aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), who is in his place, is a crofter. During the foot and mouth crisis in 2001, it was the farmers and crofters who had the biggest investment here.

I thank the 36 constituents in Glasgow East who signed the petition. In future, it would be helpful if MPs who take part in petitions debates had the opportunity to interact with those constituents. It is deeply disappointing that although Parliament will send us a heat map showing who signed the petition, we do not have the opportunity to follow up with those people who have lobbied us as parliamentarians to come and take part in a debate. That is a point for the Petitions Committee.

It is indeed a pleasure to speak from the Front Bench on behalf of the Scottish National party. I want to outline our position on live animal exports. We are committed to the welfare of all animals during transport within and outwith the UK. I am afraid we cannot support any moves that create further challenges or disadvantages for our livestock sector, or indeed for Scottish agriculture. We feel that current EU legislation is sufficient. Many good measures that protect animals are already in place, including journey logs and, if appropriate, resting at control posts.

In addition, the current regulations make provision for feeding and watering frequencies for livestock in transit. It is important to note, particularly from the Scottish perspective, that very few animals, if any, are exported from Scotland directly for slaughter. Export is largely done for other reasons, namely breeding and production. Long-distance transport of livestock is an important and traditional part of commercial Scottish agriculture. Indeed, the value of exporting is estimated by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs at £50 million in 2015 alone.

I want to make sure that the voice of stakeholders is heard during the debate. Quality Meat Scotland states that the Scottish industry “benefits from being able to import live animals with quality genetics to improve blood lines”.

The National Farmers Union of Scotland has been quoted several times tonight, between the speeches of the hon. Member for Gordon and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. I too am grateful for the briefing. NFU Scotland is fairly clear about there being no scientific evidence to suggest that animals being transported in current conditions are caused any unnecessary suffering. I acknowledge the previous horror stories, which were outlined by the hon. Member for South Thanet. Those controversies highlight the need for better and more consistent enforcement, rather than a major change in the law. The Government need to appreciate that live exports provide much needed competition within the marketplace, especially at times of peak production or when cheaper imports are placing pressure on domestic prices and demand.

As I have said, livestock production is key to Scotland’s island communities. Without processing facilities on an island, the only option is to transport animals across to the mainland by ferry. In some cases there is a need for animals to leave the island for better forage or winter accommodation, or for finishing purposes. Any attempt to restrict those crossings would be catastrophic to island communities and farmers, and where there is a major supply chain. NFU Scotland’s views on moves to ban live exports for slaughter are quite right and justifiable.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I also want to echo the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland: there is a welfare issue. Animals cannot be kept all year round on some of the islands and so have to move; it is for the good of the animals. Crofters and farmers are often worried about that, and spend a lot of time almost varnishing their nails—that is the level of work people put in when they have livestock. That must be considered. Any ban would endanger animals’ health.

David Linden: It may benefit the House to know that my wife is from Na h-Eileanan an Iar—perhaps the second best constituency in Scotland. I visit the Western Isles fairly regularly and am aware that, in the context of the deer cull, forage is an issue. My hon. Friend makes the point well.

A proposed UK framework cannot be another power grab from devolved Governments during the Brexit process. That is the point I was trying to make to the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet. The Scottish Government reserve the right to follow Scotland’s interests. That should not mean surrendering control of a devolved competence to Her Majesty’s Government.

I have already touched on the subject of the WTO. Ministers have not ruled out a ban on live animal exports, and I shall be interested to see what kind of language the Minister uses when he closes the debate. Before deciding what path to take, they should be clear about the economic consequences of implementing the policy. That means not the devolved consequences, but the economic consequences for the farming industry. Conservative Members talk an awful lot about the opportunities to come from Brexit, for animal welfare and farming. I hope that policy development will extend to all strands of agriculture, including the staff who work in abattoirs.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: One of the potential consequences of a ban, if Her Majesty’s Scottish Government do not invoke such a ban, has just occurred to me. Scottish farmers might be in an advantageous position. I am sure that it is not the perversive aim of English Members to disadvantage farmers in England. I should be happy with higher ram prices, I have to say.

David Linden: Without straying into the territory of ram prices, which is not something we routinely discuss in Glasgow East, I think my hon. Friend makes a good point. I do not know whether the Minister has considered that issue—perhaps it is why he is reaching for pen and paper.

I was saying that I want policy development to extend to abattoir staff. The Scottish National party, like most parties, takes the view that most animals should be slaughtered as close to the farm as possible. That is why it is important that abattoirs can continue to function properly post Brexit. A staggering 95% of the official veterinarians who work in our abattoirs are EU nationals, so the greatest practical matter that we should consider is ensuring that those EU nationals, many of whom are from Spain, can continue living and working here, staffing the abattoirs.
On today of all days, and given that this is essentially another Brexit debate, it would be remiss of me not to make reference to the importance of staying in the single market and in “the” customs union—not “a”. Failure to do so will result in queues of lorries, backed up with prime Scotch lamb and beef. The Scottish red meat sector already faces enough challenges down the tracks as we are dragged off the hard Brexit cliff edge. It is for that reason that the SNP refuses to engage in another Brexit debate, it would be remiss of me not to stress the importance of putting the needs of our livestock sector, or for Scottish agriculture.

6.35 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, as I was to serve under that of Mr Wilson earlier. I congratulate the petition organiser and the many signatories. I shall not go over ground that has already been covered, as that is unnecessary, but we have explored some different approaches to the issue, so I shall start with some direct questions to the Minister, allowing him plenty of time to answer them.

I want to give an immediate answer to the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), who is not paying attention at the moment, about some things that the Labour Government did. There are not many Labour Members present; there are three of us now. Perhaps Labour could be criticised for not introducing a ban on live exports previously, but we are united: we will introduce a ban on live exports. Obviously we shall have to consult about how we do it, but it is our clear intention. The previous Labour Government made progress on animal welfare, with the fur farming ban, the Animal Welfare Act 2006—I am pleased the Government intend to update that, and we shall support them where appropriate—and the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007. That is aside from what we did on the foxhunting issue. There are two Conservative Members here who strongly supported the ban—the hon. Members for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who were staunch in their support—but unfortunately many did not. It took rather too long to get the measure through, and we make no apologies for saying that we will look again at some of the implications of the ban.

To begin my questions to the Minister, I want to hear categorically that, in line with the manifesto commitment and the Live Animal Exports (Prohibition) Bill promoted by the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), he intends to bring forward legislation to ban live exports. I want to hear, with no ifs or buts, that the Government will be committed to that, notwithstanding some of the nuances—if not major differences—on how it can be done. It is important that we should hear how it will be done—whether by an amendment to the forthcoming agriculture Bill, or through an animal welfare Bill. We do not mind, and we will support it, but it would be good to know the timescale and mechanism. We obviously have some differences to sort out, not least with the territorial Administrations. It is interesting that we are not on the same page as the Scottish National party, or perhaps the Liberal Democrats, but we will do what we think is right and fair.

Secondly, I ask the Minister directly whether the issue is a deal breaker. Will we say now that we will not agree to any trade deal that does not prioritise animal welfare in exports? It is no good just saying that we will ban exports to the EU if we do not ban exports in every other potential trade deal. I know it is less likely that we will be bringing live animals from Australasia, but it would be pretty stupid to ban live exports to the EU if we do not state categorically up front that we will not do a trade deal unless a ban is in the fine print. It would be good to hear what the Minister has to say about that.

Thirdly, although I thought the Conservative party was fairly clear on the ban, it is not very clear in its relationship with the National Farmers Union, which is less than sure that the Government intend to pursue their manifesto commitment. If the NFU will be pushing for caveats and exemptions—it is entirely clear that that is also the case for the territorial farming organisations—it would be good to know quite early on what exemptions could be considered. Maybe the Minister will want to take that point away.

We know about the problems with the Irish border, which will be considerable whether or not we are in a customs union or a single market. We in the Labour party are fairly clear about where we are on those things—eventually. The situation will not be easy if the NFU believes that it really has nothing to worry about, because there are certainly some issues that it does need to worry about if it wants to maintain this trade.

Fourthly—this is a slight tangent, but nevertheless important—it is all well and good talking about banning live exports, but we are not completely on top of some of the things that happen in this country. Some hon. Members have seen the headlines in The Guardian over the weekend about some of the problems in our meat trade. We know about the scandal over horsemeat, which of course came from the Republic of Ireland. If we are going to do the decent thing and kill animals in abattoirs here, we need some pretty clear guarantees. I agree entirely that we need more local abattoirs, but the problem is that we are shutting even more at the moment. We shut a lot in the new Labour era, but that has not stopped. It continues.

Through foot and mouth, we learned of some of the mad ways in which our meat trade operates. We move animals up and down the country for a few pence on a sheep, largely depending on which abattoir the supermarkets want to send them to. It would be quite sensible to look at the regulation of that as well as the live export ban. We have to be clear that we have something substantially different in place. I say clearly to the Minister that the Russell Hume collapse has brought it to our attention that there are things going on out there that we should be much better at, regardless of where we kill the animals. It is all well and good saying that we have very high welfare standards, but we have to prove that, and sometimes we are not able to do that because of some of the things that are going on.

My last point is, dare I say it, the usual one: it would be great if this was all happening along with an improvement in the quality of inspection and, where necessary, of prosecution. Sadly, there have been major cuts in that area. The Animal and Plant Health Agency is now a much reduced body, and does anyone really think that our trading standards departments are in a stronger position than they were seven, 10 or 15 years ago? They have been cut to ribbons. That is where the cuts have taken place in local authorities.
The idea that there is a lot of inspection going on out there is sadly a myth. There is stuff that goes on out of sight and out of mind. That has an impact both on local government, through trading standards departments, and on the meat trade through the Food Standards Agency, which has also been cut back. If we are serious about this issue, we cannot pretend that we have to do anything other than make sure that those cuts are reversed. It is no good passing new legislation unless we put the resources in place to ensure that we are doing things properly.

I want to look quickly at some of the issues that have perhaps not been highlighted as much as they could have been. The documentation from the Library, produced by Elena Ares, is very useful. For one thing, following up on a parliamentary question that I asked, it shows the variability in the number of animals going for export. The variation is quite dramatic year on year. I do not know what causes that, and whether it is because of domestic price changes, but we are talking about hundreds of thousands more animals going one year than the previous year. There are some peculiarities in the trade that need to be highlighted.

If we are consistent in wanting to improve on and enhancing what the EU does, we need to go back to European Commission regulation 1200/2005, which effectively reinforces the allowing of live exports. It sets down standards such as the 65 km rules and the eight-hour rule, which have been talked about today. We have to ensure that we improve on those rules. It is no good just transposing them into British legislation without genuinely improving on them. I ask the Minister, as an aside, what guarantees he will give that we will enhance the existing situation.

There are a number of ways in which the EU already accepts that there are infringements. It does not do a very good job of regulation, and there has been a European Court of Justice ruling on live exports showing that there are inadequacies in inspection and prosecution across the whole EU. That goes back to the issue of trade; the Opposition want to be sure that WTO rules can be amended in such a way that they will not be a hurdle. It is no good leaving the customs union and single market if we cannot be clear that we can deal with WTO rules. That is an easy one for the Minister, because I am sure he will say that we will be able to do that, but we need to be absolutely up front about it. Finally, while the EU and its trade strategy and treaties have regard for animal welfare on one level, we need to be clear that our new regulations will be better than those already in existence.

I have asked questions of the Minister, and we have had an interesting debate. We have heard from the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who introduced the debate, the right hon. Members for Chipping Barnet and for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), and the hon. Members for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), for South Thanet, for Gordon (Colin Clark) and for North Thanet. We also heard from the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who put the petition together and secured the debate. As he says, more than 93,000 people have signed the petition. I too congratulate Janet Darlison and others, who put the petition together and secured the debate.

It is unsurprising that a petition calling for legislation to ban the export of live farm animals in favour of a carcass-only trade has received nearly 93,000 signatures. This issue has been the subject of a long-standing campaign by animal welfare organisations, but as most people who have followed the issue know, and as my hon. Friend acknowledged, European Union free trade rules have prevented the Government from taking meaningful action on this over the past 30 years. However, once we leave the European Union, we will be able to take action on what for many people is an iconic animal welfare issue.

While EU trade rules might have prevented Governments from banning the live export trade, we have still seen a dramatic change in the numbers of live animals exported, particularly those destined for slaughter. Some 25 years ago, around 2 million animals were exported each and every year. The peak of live exports going from the UK for slaughter was in 1992, when a total of around 400,000 cattle, 300,000 pigs and nearly 1.5 million sheep were exported from the UK directly for slaughter.

As a result of the high number of animals being exported, live export became extremely controversial, with widespread demonstrations against it at the main ports during the 1990s. Port authorities and shipping companies were put under considerable pressure to end the trade, which led to nearly all the main ferry operators refusing to take animals destined for slaughter.

In 2017, about 21,000 farm animals were exported for fattening and production, and a further 5,000 were transported directly for slaughter from Great Britain. That was a decrease on the 2016 export figures, when about 50,000 farm animals were exported for fattening and production, and around 5,200 were transported directly for slaughter from Great Britain. To put that in the context of our national production, approximately 14 million sheep were slaughtered in the UK in the
same period. The reality is that the live export for slaughter of sheep, in particular, is today a very small part of the overall UK sheep trade.

Some of those exported animals will have been transported on the MV Joline, which has sailed between Ramsgate and Calais since 2010, carrying vehicles that mostly transport sheep to Europe for slaughter or further fattening. Those sheep, after travelling to Ramsgate, spend up to six hours at sea on the MV Joline. That is followed by a further journey, often of around eight hours, before reaching their destination in France, the Netherlands, Belgium or Germany. Many people find putting animals through such long journeys, only for them to be slaughtered at the destination, indefensible.

The Government would prefer to see animals slaughtered as near as possible to their point of production, as a trade in meat on the hook is preferable to a trade based on the transport of live animals, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) pointed out. The Government are committed to improving the welfare of all animals, and share both British farmers’ and the British public’s high regard for animal welfare. We are proud to have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, and have continued to learn from raising the bar on welfare standards, for example, as a number of hon. Members pointed out, we recently introduced legislation to make CCTV mandatory in all slaughterhouses.

As we move forwards to a new relationship with Europe and the rest of the world, we have a unique opportunity to shape future animal welfare policy and ensure the highest standards in every area, including the welfare of animals in transport. To that end, we committed in our manifesto to taking early steps to control the export of live farm animals for slaughter as we leave the EU. We are considering all the options on how best to achieve that commitment, and today’s debate has been helpful in demonstrating the various issues that any new policy will need to take into account.

Over the years, various scientific and veterinary reports have been written on the needs of animals during transport. A 2011 report by the European Food Safety Authority, EFSA, made certain recommendations to improve the welfare of animals in transport, but those recommendations have not been adopted by the European Union. It is clear from reading the EFSA opinion that the requirements of different species before and during transport are significantly different. For example, studies confirm that heat stress can present a major threat to cattle welfare, while scientific evidence shows that if adult cattle are transported on journeys longer than 29 hours, fatigue and aggressiveness increase, and that cattle should be offered water during rest periods during journeys. There has also been some evidence that sheep and goats can suffer seasickness.

That 2011 report made a number of recommendations, including that the maximum journey time for horses be 12 hours, that journey times for calves be reduced and that pigs be transported in familiar groups, since they are social animals. In 2016, the UK supported Sweden in calling on the European Commission to look again at the regulations governing welfare in transport. It is disappointing that no progress has been made on this in Europe beyond the publication of good practice guides.

We are aware that there is also a significant amount of evidence and scientific research into the welfare of animals during transport, some of which was published after the current legislation came into force. We have therefore commissioned the Roslin Institute in Edinburgh to carry out a research project to look at the existing evidence base, and to highlight the key research that we need to be aware of, to ensure that any future measures we consider are based on the most up-to-date evidence.

I turn to the contributions from other hon. Members. I am very much aware that there were a number of contributions by hon. Members who have been long-standing campaigners on this issue, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who recently presented a ten-minute rule Bill on the issue, and my hon. Friends the Members for Southend West (Sir David Amess), for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) and for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale).

I will address an issue raised by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). We recognise that particular island communities may have special circumstances that we must take into account; at the other end of the country, where I come from, a similar issue pertains to the Isles of Scilly. I had the honour of visiting the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency some years ago; in fact, I visited what I think is Shetland’s one and only abattoir. It prided itself on its attention to detail when it came to animal welfare. I think I am right in saying that there is no similar facility on Orkney, and that most of the animals there are transported. That is something that we are aware of and must obviously take account of.

I completely accept that the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is sincere on this issue; she has a long-standing track record of campaigning on many issues. However, she sought to suggest that there might be a lack of commitment from the Government, or that we were backsliding. Let me be very clear: people like me who campaigned to leave the EU explained that EU law prevented us from taking action in this area. That is true. I went down to Ramsgate and met people and explained that EU law is the obstacle. After the referendum result, the Conservative party put in its manifesto a commitment to control the export of animals for slaughter when the UK leaves the European Union. As I have just pointed out, we are now giving consideration to how we will take that forward. We have been consistent throughout.

The hon. Lady should look at her party’s position on this. A few weeks ago, the Opposition introduced—with great fanfare—a package of measures on animal welfare, but just a week later adopted a position on the European single market and European customs union that would basically make many of the things they set out in that welfare manifesto unlawful under EU law.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I am grateful that the Minister has allowed me to intervene, because that point was also made earlier. I think he is referring to the Leader of the Opposition’s speech today. It set out our position on remaining in the customs union. It does not say the same thing about the single market. Hon. Members who spoke earlier rather conflated the two. They are very different positions.

**George Eustice:** We hear of all sorts of different positions on this issue from the Opposition at the moment. I simply say that EU free movement rules, which enshrine an open ports policy, govern this. Whether it is because of the customs union or single market...
legislation, the hon. Lady will find that taking action in this area will not be possible if the kind of approach that her party would like is adopted.

The hon. Lady made a legitimate point about WTO rules, but as she pointed out, there is clear WTO case law that enables Governments to ban certain trades on ethical grounds—including in a case on seal furs—as she highlighted. That issue was also looked at quite extensively in the judgment in the case of Barco de Vapor v Thanet District Council, in relation to the contentious issue that my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet pointed out. That judgment made it clear that were it not for EU regulation and EU laws in this area on trade, it would be possible for a UK Government to amend the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 to introduce an ethical ban, should they want to. EU law is the obstacle to taking action in this space.

The hon. Member for Bristol East talked about the forthcoming Command Paper on agriculture and speculated about the timing of that. I will not get into speculation about timing, except to say that we have been working very hard on these issues. I have also been very clear—I have championed this since becoming the Minister responsible for farming—that I want there to be a strong animal welfare dimension to that agriculture paper. It will look predominantly at the type of framework that we would put in place to replace the common agricultural policy, but we have already been clear that we want to look at the idea of incentives to support high animal welfare systems of production.

The hon. Lady mentioned Scotland. We are working with the devolved Administrations to try to put forward a UK approach to this issue. As she highlighted and as we heard today, there is some scepticism from the Scottish Government and Scottish industry, which we recognise. To answer the specific question, it is possible—because this is essentially trade regulation—to put in place UK-wide regulations, but under the Sewel convention, there is an expectation that we will consult the devolved Administrations, and that is what we are doing.

I turn to some of the other contributions made by hon. Members. My hon. Friend for Southend West, as I said, has been a long-standing and passionate advocate on this issue. I welcome all his positive comments about the steps that we have been taking in this regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) introduced into the debate some very important notes of caution. The Government are clear about our position: we want to control the export of live animals for slaughter. It is sometimes very difficult to do that on a sea crossing; sheep cannot be unloaded in the middle of a sea crossing.

I think that there is also a difference when it comes to transport for slaughter. The reason for that is that we go to great lengths to try to reduce the stress on animals in slaughterhouses and lairage facilities. That is one reason why our CCTV proposal for abattoirs will include cameras in lairage areas. We want to do the maximum to try to reduce the stress of those animals, and having a long, stressful journey before they get to the abattoir cannot be conducive to that.

My hon. Friend asked this important question: do we know whether the animals are actually going for slaughter or for fattening? The answer is that if they are going for slaughter, that requires a different type of declaration to be made on the export certificate, so we do have that information, although there is a moot point: how long does rearing and fattening take? People could say that, and it might be two weeks or two months; it would be difficult to record that information.

For all the reasons that I have set out, our manifesto commitment focuses on the export of animals for slaughter. We are having to look at considerations that have not been raised in today’s debate. For instance, we export some laying hens—chicken—for egg production in European countries. We have the highest standards of animal welfare in our hatcheries. We do not use practices such as maceration when it comes to hatcheries for laying hens. Other European countries do not take that approach, and if we were to displace that trade to other European countries, we would not have done a clever day’s work. There are legitimate issues that we need to take into account.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet, as I said, is a long-standing campaigner on this issue. I visited his constituency during the referendum campaign. I know that it was very galling for Thanet District Council to try to take action on something that mattered
to the public and to find that, under EU law, it was unable to do so. My hon. Friend correctly pointed out that EU law is the only impediment to our taking action in this space.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) highlighted very important issues in relation to NFU Scotland, and some of the concerns that it has raised. Like him, I grew up on a farm. We raised livestock. I am not squeamish about these things, but as a farmer, I am also passionate about high standards of animal welfare. I very much concur with his view that we should be doing more to educate schoolchildren about where their food comes from and the realities of farming.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet, as I said, also been a long-standing campaigner on this issue. She introduced a Bill on it recently. Like others, she speculated that the Government may be considering a consultation, or that a consultation may be imminent. She will understand that today my point is that we are considering how best to take forward our manifesto commitment, but I hope that I have been able, with the detail that I have been able to outline, at least to reassure her that we are looking very closely at all these details. I commend her for the work that she has done with her Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet raised the issue, as a number of others did, about small abattoirs. There is an opportunity to look at that issue again, but I am very clear that we should not water down our standards of animal welfare in abattoirs. It is sometimes the case that small abattoirs can do this well—I saw that, for instance, when I visited Shetland—but equally, we want to ensure that we have proper regulation, and that they can afford to have an official veterinarian on site, monitoring activities. We need to ensure that we do not go backwards when it comes to animal welfare, and I know that he would agree with that.

My hon. Friend also made an important point about rose veal. If we could develop more of a market for rose veal, rather than ending up having to sell calves for white veal, that would be a tremendous step forward. I very much concur with his view that we should be doing more to educate schoolchildren about where their food comes from and the realities of farming.

I come to the points made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). He asked me to clarify the Government’s intentions. I hope that I have just done that. We have a clear manifesto commitment and are considering this matter very closely. He asked whether any such provision would apply just to the EU or to other countries, and I can confirm that it would apply to all countries. We would have a consistent approach. We are not in the business of singling out the EU for different or special treatment with any such provisions that we would put in place. However, I refer back to the position of his party, which I think would compromise our ability to act in this area. He also asked whether there would be any exemptions. As I said, we are considering that. There is a specific issue when it comes to certain island communities, so of course there are certain areas that we need to look at. Also, as I made clear, we have asked the Roslin Institute to do a very thorough review of all the evidence, because we believe that different circumstances pertain for different species.

Finally, on the issue of enforcement, as I have said, we have a 100% inspection rate in the case of the MV Joline. I also point out that in all our abattoirs, we have a full-time official veterinarian working for the Food Standards Agency, who is there to enforce and maintain animal welfare standards. We also have thorough checking at the ports. There is surveillance as regards all these issues, and there must be accompanying documentation.

We have had a detailed and comprehensive debate, covering many issues. The Government are absolutely aware of the importance of this issue to the public. That is why we included it in our manifesto. I hope that the points that I have made have reassured hon. Members that we are addressing this issue.

7.10 pm

Steve Double: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this lively and informative debate. As the Minister said, it was important to raise central issues as the Government consider the way forward. I am grateful to the Minister for confirming the Government’s position within the current restraints on him. I am sure we are encouraged by the clear statement that the Government’s desire is for animals to be slaughtered as close to where they are produced as possible—we can all take great comfort from that—where they still understand the particular challenges faced by rural, particularly island, communities, and in no way want to damage the situation there. I am grateful to him for mentioning the Isles of Scilly; my in-laws will be delighted about that.

I thank all those who signed the e-petition, enabling us to have this debate. It is clearly a subject that many people in our country care passionately about. Clearly, we all have a deep desire to have the highest possible welfare standards for our farm animals. No one is suggesting anything other than that. We all want to ensure that we take any opportunities Brexit provides to improve the standards of animal welfare in our country. No one is saying anything other than that we hope to maintain and, where possible, improve those standards. I look forward to continuing to help and support the Government as they seek to do that in the months and years ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved

That this House has considered e-petition 200205 relating to ending the export of live farm animals after the UK leaves the EU.

7.12 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 27 February 2018

[Siobhain McDonagh in the Chair]

Private Probation Services

9.30 am

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered private probation services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I am delighted to have secured this debate on the role of private probation services in our justice system, an extremely important topic that I have wanted to raise for some time, particularly in the light of the reported failings of community rehabilitation companies in the probation system. The Select Committee on Justice, of which I am a member, is discussing the future of rehabilitation this morning, but the complexities of the parliamentary timetable have meant that I am here instead.

The current situation stems from the splitting of probation services into two parts in the coalition Government’s attempt to transform rehabilitation. Given the issues that I will address in my speech and the problems created by the implementation of the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2013 and the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, it is fair to say that justice policies have regressed since 2010. Probation services are now split between the national probation service, which is public and deals with high-risk offenders, and the outsourced, private community rehabilitation companies, which work with medium and low-risk offenders. The 21 CRCs were divided geographically and opened up to bids from the private sector and the third sector. Originally, 800 organisations—half from the voluntary sector—expressed an interest, but only one CRC is currently run by an organisation outside the private sector.

The primary objectives of the 2013 “Transforming Rehabilitation” initiative were to reform the system and reduce reoffending overall, partly with a Through the Gate method of enhanced rehabilitation that aims to provide prisoners with support and help in their resettlement as they make their transition back into civilian life. A prisoner in the transition stage at the end of their sentence usually requires assistance with accommodation, financial support and employment. However, as I will describe later, the original objectives are yet to be met. The reality is that the toxic privatisation of probation services has meant that CRCs continue to fail the people they were set up to help.

At the time of the reforms, Ian Lawrence, the general secretary of Napo, warned about organisational difficulties, cost and impact on communities and public safety. Furthermore, a leaked Ministry of Justice memo about the reforms said that there was a risk of “an unacceptable drop in operational performance” during the programme, which might lead to “delivery failures and reputational damage”.

Those concerns were well founded. Since Her Majesty’s inspectorate of probation began inspecting CRCs in summer 2016, it has found the majority to be operating below expectations. By the end of June 2017, CRCs had met an average of just eight of the 24 targets set under their contracts, and the worst-performing CRC met only four. If CRCs are incapable of reaching basic objectives, it casts great doubt on the ability of the whole exercise ever to reach the aims set out in the 2013 “Transforming Rehabilitation” consultation.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Our CRC in Gloucestershire, BGSW—Bristol, Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire—is owned by a European financial bank. It has had a number of poor reports, yet it seems to just carry on getting in the way of the voluntary sector, which does genuinely good work with ex-offenders. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is completely crazy that BGSW is allowed to continue?

Ellie Reeves: I agree that there are companies with little accountability, in which good work is not carried out and offenders are not properly managed. Often contact is made by telephone and probation officers do not contact offenders for months on end. I will address those points in more detail later, but I agree that the situation is unacceptable.

Probation is turning into a tick-box exercise, but it is not a profession that should be driven by targets; it requires a well-rounded approach centred on individuals and their needs, rather than an offender’s ability to provide profits to the CRC. In October 2016 and June 2017, joint inspections by Her Majesty’s inspectorates of probation and of prisons led to reports on Through the Gate resettlement services for short-term prisoners and for those serving 12 months or more. The picture was described as “bleak”, with inspectors noting that CRCs are making little difference to prisoners’ prospects on release. The latest annual report from Her Majesty’s chief inspector of prisons states that “too many prisoners continued to receive a poor resettlement service”, that resettlement services provided to prisoners before and on release were generally poor, and that they made little, if any, difference to the life chances of those who received them.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Some private companies, especially in Wales, are supervising low and medium-risk offenders with periodic phone contact, as my hon. Friend mentioned. That would never have happened before; it is obviously a cost-cutting exercise.

Ellie Reeves: I agree. If offenders are contacted only by telephone, if appointments are missed without any follow-up and if months pass before there is contact from the probation service, the system is not working; it is driven by profit, rather than by the need to rehabilitate and prevent reoffending. That is all too often overlooked.

The HMIP report stated that in almost every respect, the quality of probation work was noticeably better and on release were generally poor, and that they made little, if any, difference to the life chances of those who received them.

Ellie Reeves: I agree that there are companies with little accountability, in which good work is not carried out and offenders are not properly managed. Often contact is made by telephone and probation officers do not contact offenders for months on end. I will address those points in more detail later, but I agree that the situation is unacceptable.

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stakeholders. The report is clear in its criticisms of CRCs and their pitiful attempts at Through the Gate rehabilitation. The conclusion of the chief inspectors was damning:

“The gap between aspiration and reality is so great, that we wonder whether there is any prospect that these services will deliver the desired impact on rates of reoffending.”

They also noted:

“If Through the Gate services were removed tomorrow, in our view the impact on the resettlement of prisoners would be negligible.”

**Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab):** Does my hon. Friend agree that the failure of CRCs’ Through the Gate services will lead to more serious offending and therefore to more problems higher up for the national probation service?

**Ellie Reeves:** Yes. If the Through the Gate system is not working and if offenders are not resettled in the community with employment, housing and engagement with probation services to get their lives back on track, we know that they are more likely to reoffend. The CRCs are not getting reoffending rates down—they have failed to deliver that.

The “Transforming Rehabilitation” programme was not just about rehabilitation, but about protecting the public—a linchpin of any justice system. However, in a recent BBC “Panorama” documentary, Dame Glenys Stacey, the chief inspector of probation, stated that she could not say for certain that every private probation company was managing to protect the public as well as it should. In its investigation, “Panorama” spoke to an offender who was released from a short sentence in May. He said that he had not met his probation officer for almost a month after release, and that probation services were deteriorating; in the past, he knew exactly who his probation officer was, but now it was hard to tell. The CRC in that instance was MTCnovo, which covers all medium and low-risk offenders in London.

**John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab):** From what my hon. Friend is saying, it seems that the current system is potentially putting the public in danger and, furthermore, the leaked memo shows that the Government must have been aware that that might happen. Is that the case?

**Ellie Reeves:** That is absolutely the case. If ex-offenders are released from prison but have no contact, or only very sporadic contact, with the probation services, how can the public be assured that they are being kept safe? The chief inspector has made that point and other people made it when the reforms were going through, but still no action has been taken and these CRCs continue to operate, which puts people at risk.

“Panorama” went on to say that it has records from MTCnovo that reveal that 15,000 appointments were missed by offenders over a 16-month period, a problem that was compounded by probation officers failing to take any action over missed appointments. A whistleblower from MTCnovo said that CRCs are employing fewer staff, so individual members of staff have higher case loads. That probation officer says that he now only has 20 minutes a month with the offenders he has to deal with, which is simply not enough. He had inherited cases where 20 to 30 appointments had been missed by offenders, and in addition he said that staff were instructed by the CRC to alter records, so that missed appointments were wiped if they were more than two weeks old.

It seems that public protection is not at the heart of this programme, and the toxic climate created by this ill-judged privatisation has clearly had a detrimental impact on staff and services too. Following the creation of the National Probation Service and CRCs, existing staff were redistributed between the two organisations. From the start, CRCs had smaller case loads than predicted, which resulted in reduced levels of income, followed by restructuring with substantial job losses. Fewer staff can deal with fewer cases and the added focus on restructuring has often meant that the quality of core service delivery suffered. Low-risk offenders were often only supervised by telephone, as we have discussed, and work on safeguarding and domestic abuse was often substandard.

Three and a half years since the CRCs were created, it is clear that staff morale is low and individual case loads are too high. There are not enough staff, and many of them lack the experience and resources to do the job properly.

**Tonia Antoniazzi:** Does my hon. Friend agree that there are a large number of highly skilled and experienced probation officers who have been lost due to their being placed in the private side of the organisation, which is not always through their own choice?

**Ellie Reeves:** I agree with that assessment and there is now a situation where there have been substantial job losses, so that a lot of very experienced probation officers are no longer in post. The system is one where staff are overworked and do not necessarily have the skills and equipment that they need.

I will come on to some of the findings of a Unison survey. Unison has 3,500 members working across CRCs and the National Probation Service. It carried out a survey of members who work for CRCs and the 215 responses that it received make for really shocking reading. Twenty-five per cent. of staff said that they only occasionally had the equipment, resources or systems they needed to do their jobs properly; 41% said that they never experienced a manageable case load; 25% said that their CRC never or only occasionally completed community orders within the required time; and 43% said they never felt valued by their CRC.

**Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC):** Does the hon. Lady share my concern that CRCs received extra funding from the Government that was worth £37.15 million in the 2016-17 financial year, but because of the secrecy of the contracts between the Government and CRCs we cannot break that down to the level of individual companies or even receive the details of those contracts?

**Ellie Reeves:** I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. After I have said a little bit about staff and morale, I will go on to talk a little bit about the financial bailout of CRCs, because it is really important that we recognise the additional money that has gone into propping
up these failing companies. However, I will complete my points about staff morale and then move on to that issue.

I want to flag up some of the things that probation staff said in response to the Unison survey. One said:

“Chaotic, frustrating and exhausting. Caseloads are too high and I don’t feel as if I do anything to protect the public anymore, I simply process people. Service users...often comment as to how impersonal our service is now and that they feel telephone contact with offender managers is inadequate. Very sad knowing that I used to do good work.”

Another said:

“I have inherited a new caseload since early 2017—many cases have not been contacted for months—one case today I managed to contact had not heard from anyone at Probation for 16 months in a 24-month suspended sentence. It is not good enough.”

Perhaps the most damning response was this one:

“I feel stressed, de-professionalised and ready to give it up. This government have transformed rehabilitation alright. They have ruined it.”

Probation is ultimately a caring profession and it should be viewed as being a bit like teaching or social work. However, it is clear that those who work within the service are being hugely let down by privatised and profit-driven CRCs. That is summed up by the underlying tension between CRCs meeting contractual obligations and their responding to the needs of offenders, with the latter receiving much less attention than the former.

Shockingly the Government are now in a position where, latter receiving much less attention than the former. Probation is ultimately a caring profession and it should be viewed as being a bit like teaching or social work. However, it is clear that those who work within the service are being hugely let down by privatised and profit-driven CRCs. That is summed up by the underlying tension between CRCs meeting contractual obligations and their responding to the needs of offenders, with the latter receiving much less attention than the former.

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Shockingly the Government are now in a position where, as has already been said, they are bailing out CRCs at a cost of millions of pounds. As things stand, CRCs are paid for the volume of rehabilitation activity.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does she agree that linking payment to demand has not only affected service in times of low requirement, but has made the position of the Work First employees, whom she has described in such detail, much worse, so that many of them are suffering from low morale and are in precarious employment?

Ellie Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, and she is absolutely right. If a system is introduced whereby people are paid by results, that turns probation into the tick-box exercise that we have seen. It is not focused on rehabilitation and public protection but on making sure that all the right boxes are ticked, so that the CRC can generate profit. Profit-driven rather than people-driven is what has happened to the probation service.

CRCs are paid for the volume of rehabilitation activity that they carry out, rather than for the number of offenders that are supervised. The Ministry of Justice originally claimed that it would transfer the commercial risk of future volumes of rehabilitation activity going down, as well as up, to CRCs. They are paid in a complex way, with different payment bands for the provision of different types of rehabilitation service. However, the current volumes of activity that CRCs are paid for are far below the levels expected when the contracts were awarded.

According to National Audit Office figures, in 2015-16, the activities undertaken by CRCs ranged from 8% to 34% less than originally anticipated. In the first quarter of 2017-18, volumes of activity ranged from 16% to 48% less than anticipated. At the same time, the number of offenders supervised by CRCs increased by 20%. In effect, CRCs have to look after more offenders but do less work.

Moreover, as has become common across many private sector initiatives that have been put out to tender, CRCs underestimated their fixed costs when bidding for contracts. However, the MOJ agreed that the taxpayer, not the private companies, should shoulder that cost as well. So far, this is predicted to have cost the taxpayer an additional £342 million through a bailout of companies that was followed by adjustments made to the payment mechanism last year. It is not as if the MOJ is beyond rectifying the situation, as it has many tools at its disposal. It is entitled to fine the CRCs for poor performance, but it has either waived or allowed CRCs to reinvest 71% of the total fines due to the taxpayer.

One option that the MOJ considered in respect of poor performance by CRCs was to terminate some, or all, of their contracts. However, it decided instead to let the taxpayer take the strain of the failing contracts by amending the contract payment mechanisms to give the CRCs more money. It is clear that the privatisation of probation services has failed, and the overarching point, which repeats itself time and again, is that this is yet another example of Government-led privatisation that has gone wrong. The original arrangement and subsequent contracts were not fit for purpose in the first place, and what we are left with is a system driven by the ideological desire to privatised key elements of our justice system and defend the cause even when it evidently fails.

The idea of a Government bailing out a private sector service when the prison and rehabilitation services are in crisis should concern us all, particularly given that ageing, dilapidated prisons are falling apart—HMP Liverpool has been described as having the worst conditions in a 24-month suspended sentence. It is not good enough.”

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9.51 am

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for securing this important debate and introducing it excellently. I declare an interest as co-chair of the justice unions and family courts parliamentary group.

In the 2010 coalition agreement, the Government promised a rehabilitation revolution, but with the privatisation of probation companies, we have instead...
[Liz Saville Roberts]

had a fundamental erosion of the humanitarian principles that underpin meaningful rehabilitation. The Government refuse to acknowledge that their blinkered ideology of privatisation has failed and, in so doing, they are failing with regard to the basic premise of justice as a common good for all of society.

Good offender management is inseparable from quality probation supervision. In its most recent report, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of probation warns that it had found “CRCs stretched beyond their capacity” and that, in many CRCs, “case management itself is insufficient to enable good enforcement decisions”.

which statistics in the report confirm—only 37% of CRC enforcement cases sampled involved good-quality assessment of the likelihood of reoffending, compared with 83% in the public sector national probation service. It is said that we should not compare CRCs with the NPS, but the most serious crimes lie with the NPS, and when we see figures of 37% versus 83%, there are questions to be answered.

That is wholly unsurprising when we look at how CRCs supervise people, with infrequent meetings, and sometimes only by phone, which breaks the face-to-face relationships that are vital to successful probation work. That lack of meaningful engagement has led to poor decisions in managing breaches of orders. The recent HMIP report also reveals that, in more than half of all inspected cases in which CRCs had returned service users to court, the decision to enforce was not appropriate, compared with just 14% of NPS cases. It appears that CRCs were “seldom” making such decisions on the risk of harm posed or the likelihood of reoffending.

CRCs are private companies. At best, they are motivated by the detail of contract compliance, rather than by the true quality of supervision. The ethos of public service and motivation of care are not their primary drivers. Does the Minister finally recognise that dismantling the probation service and replacing it with a part-privatised model has failed, and will he commit his Government to listening to the professionals when they call for an end to profiting from probation?

It is all very well to talk in statistics, but the failings have real consequences for real families. Almost three years ago, in March 2015, an innocent young man was murdered by an offender who was meant to be under the supervision of Working Links, the CRC operating in Wales. Conner Marshall, an 18-year-old, was staying with friends at a caravan site in Porthcawl, Bridgend when he was attacked in a case of mistaken identity. High on a cocktail of alcohol and drugs, his killer stamped on his face, kicked him in the ribs, stripped him naked and hit him repeatedly with a metal pole.

The individual has been jailed for life after having been found guilty of murder. Conner’s killer was on community probation for a string of offences, including domestic violence and animal cruelty. He was on curfew and ordered to attend anti-drugs and alcohol meetings, but failed to turn up to several of them. Procedures were not followed. There were eight missed appointments, six of which were without valid reason. That was eight missed opportunities to rein in the murderer and implement the breach conditions. The opportunities were never taken, and he was not stopped. On behalf of Conner’s mother, Nadine Marshall, I emphasise that at present there are no representation policies for the families of victims in such horrific and tragic circumstances.

The system as it currently operates is not fit for purpose. Less than a decade ago, we were promised a rehabilitation revolution. Will the Minister confirm whether, and if so when, the wheel will finally turn beyond this failed revolution?

9.55 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devronport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this important debate. I want to make some brief remarks about what people who work in probation in Plymouth have told me. We owe them a debt of thanks.

The Government’s part-privatisation of probation has been a colossal failure. The broken system is putting the public at greater risk and increasingly leaving taxpayers out of pocket. Ministers knew before the privatisation was put in place that the system would not work. Experts told them that it would conflict with best practice and put added pressure on staff, yet they went ahead. When it was obvious that the early CRCs were failing, the privatisation continued, meaning that people who relied on probation services to be professional and of high quality were being failed and, as a result, were the public. Ministers must now know that it is unacceptable for the Government to continually bail out CRCs. It is time to draw a line in the sand. With our prisons in crisis, we need probation to perform without hindrance, organisational chaos and uncertainty.

The whole criminal justice system needs to be improved because it is not working. CRCs are not working. I fear that Ministers, not for the first time, are defending a broken system made worse by privatisation. Probation cannot wait for a Labour Government to end the shambles and bring the contracts back into the public sector, so we must put pressure on Ministers to act now. I fear that Ministers are conforming to type. When privatisation goes wrong they first defend the failure of the privatised services. Secondly, they reward the failure, as we see in the bailing out of CRCs. Finally, there is a continued failure to tackle the root causes of the problem: putting profit ahead of people, fragmentation of the services, and the way in which the system undervalues staff and misses results. Defending failure, rewarding failure and failing to tackle the root causes are the hallmarks not only of what has happened to probation services, but of the privatisation of our NHS, and we need to call it out. Probation is too important to let privatisation fail. We must make the system work, and if that cannot be done by bringing the contracts back in house, Ministers need to get a grip on the system.

Probation staff in Plymouth have told me a variety of stories about their experience of working in the system and about what it means for the people they are trying to help. It is worth remembering that people who work in probation do so because they want to make the lives of the people they work with better, reduce reoffending and protect the public. They show a genuine, caring devotion. They do not go into probation because they are looking for big pay cheques—they would be looking in the wrong place—but because they want to make a
difference. That good will and the hard work of the staff is possibly the only thing that is holding the probation system together.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Following privatisation, probation officers in the national probation service have carried ridiculously high case loads of offenders who pose high or very high risk of harm. Probation officers working in the public sector do not have a balanced case load of medium and high-risk cases any more, as there was before the split. The pressure and stress of those cases together with the insufficient number of probation officers to do the job has resulted in unmanageable case loads and higher levels of sickness among staff. Has that been found in Plymouth?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Having about 60 cases per individual maintains professionalism and a safe level of contact with offenders. It is now being reported that, in some cases, probation officers are handling 200 cases. The Minister has a famously good memory, but not everyone who works in probation has that. Remembering the details of 200 cases is asking too much of those who work in our probation system.

The staff I have spoken to in Plymouth have told me that they feel undervalued and overworked. The best practice that they spent years developing has been taken out of the system and good methods of rehabilitation have been stripped back. Staff have told me that they are worried that things are only going to get worse. One member of staff told me that she went into the profession because she cared. She told me that she loves her job, but all too frequently she is going home at night and crying because she knows that the level of care and professionalism she is able to offer is not what she would like. That damages her feeling of self-worth and of being valued by the system. These are precisely the type of people we need to retain and support in our probation system. It is a poor way to treat the people who keep our public safe.

In Plymouth, the failures of our probation system were brought home on new year’s day 2015 by the murder of Tanis Bhandari in Tamerton Foliot, which is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). In Plymouth, there has been a debate, led most ably by Councillor Philippa Davey, about the failures of probation to monitor Donald Pemberton at the time when he and Ryan Williams murdered the Plymouth builder, Tanis. Tanis was an incredibly popular figure within Plymouth, and the failure of the probation system to monitor the offenders probably directly led to that murder, because a better managed system would reduce reoffending. A poor probation system has real-world consequences, and Tanis’s family is one of the many families across the country that are being let down by a system that is not working and is clearly failing. How many more families need to be let down for Ministers to act?

The CRC system is not working. It needs to be brought back in house. I ask the Minister not to do the three things that we frequently hear from Ministers on broken prioritisation systems. Please do not defend the failure of the system or reward it any further. Please tackle the root cause: a broken and fragmented prioritisation system that is not working. Our public and the staff who do such an amazing job in our probation service deserve much better.

10.3 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I apologise to the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), who I thought would have been called before me. We will hear her comments later on.

We do not have private probation services in Northern Ireland, but I have been sent some information and I want to add constructively to the debate if I can. I will focus on the individuals and how they can be rehabilitated in prison, as well as the family units. It is important that we focus on the effects on all the people.

I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for securing this debate and for setting the scene so well, as she always does. The issue does not directly affect Northern Ireland, yet there are lessons to be learned for all the regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We have a prison system groaning under the weight of the pressures on it. We have a judicial system that is extremely aware that it can imprison only if it is essential, because there is no room. We have a probation system that is still failing to rehabilitate prisoners, to the detriment of every member of society. I am not here to point the finger at the Department or the Minister. That is not my form; but neither is it my form to ignore issues that have been raised. That is why we are all here today, and Members have put forward pertinent points in their contributions and interventions.

There is an issue with the new system that needs to be addressed. I say that not to score political points or to demonstrate that my ideas are better than those of others; we simply have to do the best we can by offenders. We need to put in place structures that support them. Through that, we can help to prevent reoffending. The issues with reoffending are important.

Dr Drew: Would the hon. Gentleman accept that one of the fundamental failings is the lack of continuity between what happens in prison, where there is a need for people to be properly rehabilitated and prepared for release, and what happens afterwards? If my area is anything to go by, there is no overlap; things have to start again as soon as people are released. That means that offenders and ex-offenders feel completely let down.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will touch on that issue, because it is important that we have that follow on. What happens next after someone gets out of prison is a clear issue.

It is sometimes easy to fall into a mentality of seeing those in prison as lost causes, but that is not something I believe at all. I believe that all people can make mistakes and that they can put right those mistakes and become contributors to their communities again. The hon. Gentleman and others have referred to that. I know a few good men who society washed their hands of during the troubles in Northern Ireland, yet they were given the opportunity by one tender-hearted person and are now upstanding pillars of the community. People can change, and we have a responsibility to
[Jim Shannon]

enable that change to take place. It may not work for every individual, but it can work for a great many. I know people who have changed. That is the reality. We need to focus on what can be achieved and how we can achieve it. That has to be our goal and purpose.

I was surprised to learn that one in 10 people in England and Wales are released back to their community without a roof over their head. That simply should not be. They should not be released with a metaphorical boot to the backside, without so much as a by-your-leave. In some cases, that seems to be the way it is, and it is hard to understand why. We must ensure that they not only have somewhere to sleep the day they come home, but that they have something meaningful to achieve the next morning. We have a rehabilitation process for people to go through when they are in prison and when they get out. If they are going home to nothing, it is little wonder that it is so easy to get into the same routine. We must ask how we can do things differently. How can we get these men and women involved in our society in a meaningful and helpful way?

Thus far, the private probation services have been unable to make a difference. I do not want to be unduly critical, but that is what the evidential base indicates. Indeed, some reports indicate that incidences of recidivism have intensified. If they are intensifying, as was referred to in an intervention, that may be because a phone call does not achieve what a meeting or appointment can. I suggest to the Minister that it should be a meeting or appointment. That is more constructive and face-to-face, and it can make changes. Printing off a housing form does not achieve the results that attending the housing executive—in England, it is the local council—does. We should not mollycoddle these people, but if we believe in the justice system at all, we believe they have paid their debt to society and deserve help to find their way in a different world. We should encourage them to do so.

I also think of the children and families of offenders. It is essential that follow-up services are provided for the sake of those nearest and dearest to them. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighted that prisoners’ families were vulnerable to financial instability, poverty, debt and potential housing disruption following the imprisonment of a family member. It can be easy to forget that these issues affect not just the individual, but the whole family unit. The report found that families subsidised imprisonment by sending prisoners money, clothing and electronic goods. The responsibility to help those in prison financially often falls to a great extent on families. Disadvantage associated with imprisonment includes high rates of depression—sometimes the health spin-offs are not taken on board—physical illness, housing disruption and, for families of foreign national prisoners, permanent separation after deportation. Again, that is perhaps not an issue for this debate, but it is certainly something that the system should address.

The report also highlighted how prisoners’ partners and mothers prioritised the care needs of children above household income, and there is an impact on children at school where we know that peer pressure can be difficult. Barriers to employment were magnified for those caring for prisoners’ children. The complications are enormous. When someone comes out of prison to a family under such strain and pressure, it is easy to see how they could go back to their old ways, not understanding that breaking the cycle will help to heal the hurt that their family is going through. That should be taken into consideration and should be a priority for the Government when discussing how to rehabilitate prisoners successfully. That should be our goal. I know the Minister wants that, as we all do in this House.

To conclude, I cannot say how the shortfall has come about, but we must all acknowledge—as Members who have contributed so far have indicated—that there is a definite shortfall that we must address for our communities. I hope the Minister, whom we all respect highly, will tell us how he intends to do that, either in the new private system or by taking back the reins, which is what I think the Members here want. Decisions need to be made, and for the sake of our family units we must ensure that changes are made as a matter of urgency.

10.11 am

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who made interesting points. I welcome his comment about taking back the reins, because that gets to the heart of the matter. Because of the fragmentation of the system, nobody is holding the reins in the way that they once did when looking at the rehabilitation of offenders outside of prison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this debate. This area of justice policy has never had the scrutiny and interest that it deserves from Members or the media, or from anywhere. It is good to see Members in this place taking a lead and putting the spotlight on this issue, because it is so important.

Sadly, the situation today was entirely predictable. It has been a disaster and it was avoidable, but it could be remedied. I know that the Minister was not in the Ministry of Justice when the decisions were taken, so we do not blame him, but he now has the opportunity to reverse some of the decisions that have led to the catastrophe in the service. If he does not take that opportunity, he will be responsible for that and we will hold him to it. If he were to indicate that he might review the system or look at reunitifying probation services, I am sure—even though I cannot speak for my Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain)—that he would have the wholehearted support of Opposition parties across the House.

The warnings about the Government’s mistake came not only from the Labour party, but from staff, the unions and academics, and from people from other jurisdictions where similar things had been attempted. Nobody that I could find thought the Government were taking the right approach.

There was not much scrutiny at the time of how the changes would affect probation staff—the professionals who had decided to dedicate their working lives to working with some of the most incredibly difficult people in society. I have had limited experience of working with offenders, and they are flippin’ difficult. They do not always tell you the truth, so the idea of assessing what they are doing with their lives, what they intend to do next or what control they have over their
own decision making, all on the basis of a phone call, is completely implausible to most people with any experience of working with such individuals. We have separated not only offenders, but a group of professionals who were very good at sharing knowledge, supporting one another and working with a mix of offenders. Working with serious offenders all the time is difficult, stressful and emotionally hard work.

The Minister needs to read some of the court reports that detail some of the offences committed by offenders to see how that affects him. I do not think the supervision needed when working with such groups of offenders has ever really been properly provided, but it is even more difficult now, when individuals work with those types of offenders all the time. It is incredibly difficult work. Previously, someone might go into probation and work with some low or medium-risk offenders for a while and gradually take on higher-risk individuals under supervision. That progression and development in practice and that knowledge and understanding have been lost. That is a real loss to the service. We might not be seeing the impact just yet, but we will increasingly see it over time.

Liz Saville Roberts: The Government have argued in the past that we had not allowed enough time to review the performance of CRCs, but we are now more than two years after payment by results was brought in, so it is time to review whether it is working effectively or not.

Jenny Chapman: I agree: now is the moment. It would have been better to run a pilot, but the Government were determined to embark on a mission that was so fundamentally flawed it was never going to work. Had they been so minded, they could have piloted the approach and gathered evidence of the problems. That would have caused far less damage than selling off half the service in 35 different trust areas in one go and thinking that everything would go smoothly. They removed any opportunity for learning in the process, and that was reckless. It is something that the Government, even if they will not say so publicly, really ought to reflect on and probably should regret.

Selling off all the areas at once was incredibly high risk. The then Secretary of State, the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), was asked at the time why he was so determined to do it. I remember this clearly and was quite shocked. He was asked for any evidence from anywhere to justify such a reckless move, and he simply said that he had inner belief that it would work. He was determined to prove it, and then he went off to run the trains. What the Government did was a mistake. It was stupid and is not something that this Minister would want to repeat. I am sure he is somebody who will look at evidence and take into account the track record of CRCs. He needs to make decisions that will change the current structures.

The whole thing has been based on the flawed premise that offenders fall neatly into two separate groups, but they do not. Risk fluctuates constantly. It takes experienced probation officers to assess that—to notice it, to know what they are supposed to look for and then to know what to do when they suspect the risk might be about to change.

We are talking about an incredibly difficult group of people. Probably everybody here has heard this, but I want to get some characteristics of offenders on the record—27% having been taken into care, compared with 2% of the general population; 49% having been excluded from school, compared with 2%; numeracy and literacy levels of an 11-year-old or below at 65% and 48% respectively; 72% of men and 70% of women with two or more mental disorders; 83% of men with a history of hazardous drinking; drug misuse at 66%. We are not talking about people who have just got themselves on the earliest steps to a life of criminality. These are chaotic, confused people, with very little control over what they do. In the sector, they would probably say they are bang at it and are only getting lifted for a proportion of what they are up to. Probation work is incredibly difficult and it relies on the good will, professionalism and experience of an outstanding workforce. To be successful, we need to harness the very best practice in the profession and make that available to all offenders.

The trusts could have delivered that. They were doing a good job and met all the targets they were set by successive Governments. They were independently assessed at the time as excellent. Had the Government wanted them to behave in a different way, such as to work more collaboratively with voluntary and community sector organisations, they should have made that clear to trusts and made that a target. I am confident that the trusts would have been able to deliver on the objectives set them by the Government, even the ambition of wanting to supervise those being released from a prison sentence of less than 12 months. That was one of the objectives the Government set at the time. I do not deny that it was a good objective, but there was no attempt at all to try to achieve it within the existing arrangements.

That was negligent and arrogant. It was a bullish approach from Ministers at the time, and it was a real mistake. This is a complex issue, but it is incredibly high stakes. Splitting the service has been an error. I urge Ministers to listen now in a way that they did not at that time, and to take whatever steps are necessary to reverse the decision and keep the public safe.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): There being no other Back-Bench Members wishing to speak, I call the shadow Minister.

10.21 am

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I begin by joining other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this debate. Hon. Members are absolutely right that this issue does not get the airtime that it deserves. It needs discussion. My hon. Friend made a powerful speech, comprehensively setting out the factual background to the formation of the community rehabilitation companies and setting out the failures with great clarity, as did many other hon. Members. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this important debate.

It is clear from listening to the contributions that—let us be clear and frank—the state of probation is dire. Although there were problems back in 2015, probation never used to look like this. The Government’s ill-fated reform agenda, “Transforming Rehabilitation”, has been nothing short of a failure. It has failed offender rehabilitation, with many left ill-equipped for life on
the outside. It has failed prison officers and governors, who are seeing their prisons pushed to breaking point by overcrowding, and it has failed the public, who are bearing the financial and safety brunt of the failures. The only group that it has not failed, as has quite rightly been pointed out, are the private companies that are lining their pockets.

When reforming probation, the Government had the opportunity to make things better, transform rehabilitation, improve the prospects of offenders and slash reoffending, which is costing the country £15 billion a year. What they delivered was not so much transforming rehabilitation as privatising rehabilitation, weakening rehabilitation and ultimately destroying rehabilitation. By almost every metric and every means by which to measure its effectiveness and its success, it has failed, and some aspects have failed spectacularly.

Hon. Members have quite rightly mentioned the failures of the Through the Gate services, which have been a complete disaster. In 2015, the then Prisons Minister stated that those services would provide “support to offenders for accommodation needs, employment brokerage and retention, finance and debt advice”. I have seen very little evidence that that support is being provided and no sign of real, joined-up services to support offender rehabilitation.

The HMIP report and its conclusions on Through the Gate services have been referred to. What it found was startling, particularly in the areas of support the Ministry of Justice identified. Of its sample of short-term prisoners, just 31% had sufficient work done with them to meet their accommodation needs, just 33% their education and training needs, and just 12% their finance, benefit and debt advice needs. Some 10% of the sample found themselves homeless on release. Another report by HMIP found, quite worryingly, that not one offender had been helped by Through the Gate services to enter education, training or employment after release.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. For the benefit of the Chair and for Hansard, it might be better if the shadow Minister swivelled round a little and spoke into the microphone.

Imran Hussain: My apologies, Ms McDonagh. End-to-end offender management is vital to stop reoffending, and HMIP has set out a minimum level of requirements for resettlement. However, it is clear that Through the Gate services, when provided by private probation companies, cannot deliver. They cannot support offender rehabilitation and they cannot prepare them for life on the outside after release. It is that inability to support offenders that ensures that a privatised probation system can do nothing to stop reoffending.

Currently, around two in three prisoners serving sentences of less than 12 months reoffend. One in three prisoners on longer sentences reoffend. Stopping reoffending is the very core of a probation company’s goal. It is its purpose, yet 19 out of 21 private probation companies have seen an increase in reoffending because they are treating probation not as an important service but as a box-ticking exercise. There is little to no meaningful engagement, with supervision of offenders taking place over the phone, as has been pointed out. If they do meet face-to-face, it is sometimes in a very public space with no privacy, such as in a library.

The MOJ stated that the “Transforming Rehabilitation” programme would allow providers to focus relentlessly on driving down reoffending, but that has clearly not happened, as if they are not properly supported, offenders cannot be helped in not reoffending. That does not just impact on offender rehabilitation. It has knock-on effects for prisons, as those reoffending are sent back to an overcrowded prison system, which in 2015-16 saw, on average, almost 21,000 prisoners held in overcrowded accommodation. That in turn affects prison safety, as fewer prison officers are dealing with more prisoners. The rampant and increasing violence we are seeing in prisons is just one by-product of overcrowding, putting prison officers and prisoner safety at risk.

Probation failures are not just failing those criminal justice professionals by putting their safety at risk; they are failing the judicial system, which finds itself with fewer options for sentencing. An independent judiciary that can use its discretion to a degree is an important pillar of justice, but as there is increasing distrust of CRCs to deliver community sentences, it finds itself with fewer options.

However far removed all this might be perceived to be from many people’s lives, with many of them never having an interaction with prison and probation services, the Government’s changes to probation have also failed the public. People expect safety and security in the knowledge that we have a criminal justice system that works; they expect judges to have a range of options open to them; they expect offenders to be punished when they go to prison; to be rehabilitated while there; and to be released back into the community as changed persons ready to contribute to society. But prison is not working, with increasing violence and persistent overcrowding, and neither is probation. Offenders are released back into communities without proper reform, as we see from the failure of Through the Gate services, and without proper supervision, as we see with private probation companies supervising them by phone.

The decision to privatise night-waking watch staff and replace them with minimum-wage staff at probation hostels, which house the most dangerous ex-offenders, further threatens safety and shows that the Government have not learned the lessons from privatising justice. Two people have been killed at probation hostels in the past year. The cost of reoffending totals about £15 billion a year, according to the Work and Pensions Committee. The public are footing the bill for overcrowding and reoffending, and their safety is being compromised.

The Government’s probation privatisation is failing offender rehabilitation, criminal justice professionals and the public, but not private companies, which, in fact, have quite a comfortable life. They have taken on contracts over which the MOJ has little oversight. They have failed in their goal of reducing reoffending, and there have been numerous critical reports from the probation inspector, yet no sanctions have been applied to them. If any other organisation failed in its objectives, its contracts would be wound up, so why not probation companies? They have not received the financial benefits they expected, but all they have to do is cry about falling profits and the Government bail them out. Some £22 million was handed over before any changes were made.
No questions were asked, and there was no scrutiny of the private probation companies to prevent future failings. Instead, the Government changed the contracts afterwards to make things easier. The private probation companies are getting away with failure and are frankly being rewarded for it.

The creation of private probation companies has been a disaster, and the reform of probation has been an extraordinary failure. The companies have let down everyone they have come across and are not fit for purpose. I have a number of questions for the Minister. He and I have worked together on other policy areas, and I know that he is quite an amiable, reasonable chap. He has the opportunity today to really listen, to address this issue and to start afresh. Nobody will accept that the privatisation of probation has not been a failure.

My asks of the Minister are these. Will he accept that Through the Gate services have failed, and will he put in place changes in conjunction with other Departments to deliver joined-up services so that offenders are given every opportunity to be rehabilitated on release? What is the contingency plan in the event of the collapse of Interserve, which, as I am sure he will agree, is increasingly likely? Has his Department learned lessons from this disaster, and will it keep people safe by abandoning its plans to privatise the night-waking watch in probation hostels? Finally, will he accept that transforming rehabilitation has been a failure, and will he commit to take probation back in-house to deliver a probation service that works for offender rehabilitation, the criminal justice system and the public, not for private, profit-making companies?

10.33 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart):

It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this debate, which is hugely important, given the risk that criminals can pose to the public, as the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) described the horrifying situation that happened to her constituent, Conner, when somebody who was supervised at all; and, thirdly, how on earth to deal with—the Opposition is that, for a number of reasons, I do not believe the question is only whether the service should be provided by the public sector or the private sector. Many of these issues predate the privatisation. There were very significant problems with probation in 2010, 2012 and 2014. It made sense—on this, I defend my predecessors—to try to work out how to deal with some of those stubborn problems, including, first, the absence of any proper Through the Gate services; secondly, the fact that before 2014, 40,000 prolific reoffenders were not supervised at all; and, thirdly, how on earth to deal with the stubborn reoffending rate of 50%. It seemed perfectly justifiable that people would try to think about how we could focus relentlessly on dropping the reoffending rate and on encouraging innovation. Why innovation? Because an enormous number of voluntary-sector organisations and charities around the country have proved that the reoffending rates can be reduced. I was looking at a recent example in Stafford, where a chaplaincy housing project has managed to reduce the reoffending of persistent reoffenders—very tough group to work with—from 50% to what appears to be about 17%. There are similar examples, such as the Clink restaurant in Brixton Prison. Meeting people at the gate, finding them a job and putting them into the catering industry reduces reoffending dramatically. The idea of the reform was to try to bring some of those new ideas into the system.

Jenny Chapman: The Minister is trying to be helpful in acknowledging our points, but I want to challenge him. He is arguing that trusts were not innovative, but they absolutely were. He talks about the Clink and other examples. There are always pockets of absolutely excellent practice that have amazing successes, but the challenge is mainstreaming that, and getting it out so that it is the norm and not the exception. This reform has made that more difficult. Rather than analysing where we are, I hope the Minister will move on to tell us where he intends to take us next.

Rory Stewart: That is a very good challenge, and I will move on to the question of the voluntary sector and how to take good small examples to a bigger scale.

The challenge is what on earth to do about that. How do we address the problems? The fundamental thing is to get back to the basics, which are exactly what
hon. Members in the Chamber have discussed. Basics include ensuring that people have a manageable case load, which means not going beyond 50 to 55 cases. They must meet the people in the cases regularly; they must ensure that they not only meet them but put in place a good assessment of the needs of the individual and of public protection; and they must come up with a plan linking that assessment to action. That is before we go on to the other things that we have been discussing, which is how we work with the voluntary sector and wider society. The basics need to happen first.

Around the country we can see that some people are delivering those basics well. Cumbria, for example, which has a CRC, has a good report from the inspectors for doing that. London, as the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge knows well, got a negative report from the inspectors exactly about some of those areas. We will not go into the details and explanations for some of that today. Some are about transition and inheriting a difficult situation, and London has always been difficult for probation services and has more than 30 different boroughs. There are complexities with IT systems and so on. However, we do not want to make excuses. The fundamental question is: can we sort those things out? I believe we can.

I am very confident that we can get to a situation, even in London, which is probably the most difficult area in the country, where we can have manageable case loads, where people can be met regularly, where there is good tracking of offenders—we know where they are and take good enforcement action if they do not turn up to appointments—and where the assessment and the plan are in place. I am very hopeful that, when the next inspection report comes out from the probation inspectorate, we will see those improvements even in London. I expect to be held accountable if those improvements are not recorded in the next report.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am interested in what the Minister is saying. Will he commit to ensure proper parliamentary scrutiny of how those organisations operate, whatever their name in future? That is not the case at present.

Rory Stewart: It would be interesting to know what kind of parliamentary scrutiny the hon. Lady means. There are some pretty good examples of scrutiny—the Justice Committee is doing a report on the probation service and we have an incredibly active, energetic and highly critical chief inspector of probation who is doing an enormously good job which is drawn on by everyone around the Chamber—but I am open to more. Debates such as this one are very powerful ways to hold us to account.

The next issue, as we move on from addressing the basics, is to look at some of the questions the hon. Member for Darlington talked about, in particular how we scale up pockets of really good small practice in individual local areas. That seems to be a huge challenge for everything—not just probation but everything we do with the voluntary sector. It is frustrating to find in most of our constituencies good local providers being pushed out either by contractors coming in from elsewhere or by large charities and voluntary sector organisations.

In my case, in Cumbria, they appear to come up from London with hundreds of proposal writers to take over a local council contract, but lack the local skills and knowledge to deliver.

We need to find ways to encourage CRCs to provide both the money that could go to those voluntary organisations—for example, in housing—and the cultural change, as the hon. Member for Darlington is aware, which is to encourage probation officers to let go of the stereotypes to let specialist providers in, mental health, rehousing take over their clients. That can be done but it must be driven through individual CRC by individual CRC. However, that is just the beginning. The big aim is to move from what happens with the individual in the probation office to what happens in broader society.

The real reason we have faced reoffending rates stubbornly stuck at 50% for nearly 40 years is that, in the end, the behaviour of someone coming out of prison is not controlled simply by what happens in the interaction with the probation officer or, when in prison, the prison officer. That is a very individual psychological engagement. What tends to happen is that the probation officer tries to change the behaviour of the individual in the room. However, that individual exists not only in the room but in a broader society. Unless such individuals can repair their relationships with family, society and the state, we will not get into a cycle in which they offend less or, eventually, do not offend at all.

That involves difficult things, with the individual feeling a sense of hope and agency; and that they can take control of their lives and have a sense of dignified participation, not as a labelled criminal but as a citizen in the fullest sense in society. No one in the Chamber has easy answers to how to achieve those things, but we must focus on ensuring that we get everything right, from the basics of meeting, assessment and planning, right through to the broader engagement with society to make that citizen function. We must recognise that the idea of desistance is not a linear path, but it is a path to reduce reoffending and protect the public.

I will conclude with three remarks. First, I pay tribute to the very hard work of probation officers. They are some of our most dedicated and serious professionals. Yesterday in Nottingham Prison I was lucky enough to see the Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Rutland CRC—people who have worked in probation trusts for nearly 30 years. They are based in the prison, telling very powerful stories about the assistance they provide in housing, and they represent exactly why we should be so proud of the work that probation officers do. They have difficult work which, as hon. Members have pointed out, combines the work of a social worker with that of someone who has to implement a court order and protect the public.

Secondly, I pay tribute to Members of Parliament. Their work in this area is often ignored by the public and, sometimes, too much ignored by Parliament. Such work matters deeply, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, both for the individuals themselves on their journey towards improvement, and for the public.

Finally, I undertake to the House that we must focus. The results that we are getting from the inspectors are simply not good enough. I wish to be judged on driving the CRCs back to the very basics of their task, and on opening up to all the innovations and new ideas shared
around the Chamber, to ensure that 40 years of stubborn rates of reoffending begin to be addressed, for the sake of individual offenders and the public as a whole.

10.47 am

**Ellie Reeves:** I again put on the record my thanks for being able to have this important debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) said, this issue does not often get a lot of attention either inside or outside the House, so it is important that so many hon. Members have been in the Chamber to talk about it. We have had a good discussion about the precarious position in which our probation services find themselves.

As I said, the Justice Committee, of which I am a member, is considering all the issues. I look forward to speaking in Committee after this debate about what has been discussed and how we can take it forward.

I am grateful to hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. A number of my hon. Friends raised the individual cases of their constituents, and I am aware of the tragic case of Conner Marshall, which could have been avoided had the probation service acted on missed appointments. Those were missed opportunities, as the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) rightly pointed out. That underscores why action on probation services is needed so urgently—so that nothing like that happens again.

We have talked at length about staff, and I am glad that the Minister put on the record the tremendous work of probation staff, often in challenging circumstances under CRCs. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) experiences of probation workers in his constituency, and of those Unison members. Probation staff do a tremendous job. They are not in the profession for the money, but because they care. They need proper resources, and they need to be valued. They need to be able to help the people that they went into the profession to help, and not just simply tick boxes to secure a profit for the CRC they work for. We will take that incredibly important point away from the debate.

It often feels like the voluntary sector is doing great work despite CRCs. In London, we have Clinks and a great charity called Switchback that does a huge amount of work with offenders, runs a café in east London and works with prisoners at the end of their sentences. More should be done to support them and to support innovation. CRCs have not been innovative. They have not done the work they ought to have been doing because they are ticking boxes. They are not there to be innovative, but to generate a profit, because they are private companies. That is where this has gone so incredibly wrong.

I am grateful for the Minister’s points about MTC Novo, which is clearly failing at probation in London. On his comments about its latest inspection, I hope we will see an improvement. I am grateful that he has been willing to be accountable for what is in that report, which I will want to follow up.

It has become evident throughout the debate that CRCs in their current form are not fit for purpose. They have been part of an ideological move away from public services, which have been handed to the private sector. When they go wrong, rather than saying, “This has gone wrong. They need to come back into public ownership”, they have been bailed out by the Government. It is not acceptable and it is ideologically driven. The CRCs need to go back into public control, so that we are left with a rehabilitation system that is fit for purpose, and that can reduce reoffending and keep the public safe and reassured. That is the main thing that we will take away from today.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered private probation services.

10.52 am

*Sitting suspended.*
Scottish City Deals

11 am

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the progress of Scottish city deals.

As always, it is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. The Localism Act 2011 created the concept of core cities in the UK and granted significant devolved power over financial and planning matters to city regions that successfully negotiated deals with central Government. As the greatest city in the world, it was inevitable that Glasgow was the first city region in Scotland to successfully negotiate a city deal in 2014. I pay tribute to the city region’s councillors—particularly the Labour councillors—who led the championing of that deal. Gordon Matheson, who was then leader of Glasgow City Council, and his colleagues played a vital role in ensuring that the deal was achieved, and it proved to be the harbinger of successful deals for Aberdeen, Inverness, Edinburgh and Stirling.

Glasgow’s deal was agreed by the UK Government, the Scottish Government and the eight local authorities in Glasgow and the Clyde valley: East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire. It aims ambitiously to support the creation of 29,000 jobs, underpinned by £1 billion of Scottish Government and UK Government capital funding and £3.3 billion of private sector investment to support a proposed infrastructure investment programme. The purported aims of the deal are based on three themes: a £1.1 billion fund to support 20 major infrastructure projects in the region, including reviving plans for the long-awaited rail link between the city centre and the airport; three labour market projects to address local employment challenges; and innovation and growth projects to support the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises and enhance the city’s life sciences sector.

The city deal promises significant funds for Glasgow’s development, but very little progress has been made since 2014. For example, more than three years after the deal was agreed, the plan for the Glasgow airport rail link, which was meant to be a key component of the deal, has yet to be agreed. I would like the UK Government to take this opportunity to explain to us Glaswegians why there has been such a significant lack of progress. That raises serious questions about the way in which the Scottish city deals, particularly the Glasgow city deal, were set up, how they are being run and where they will go next.

The Glasgow city deal has been extremely badly handled by the Governments at Westminster and Holyrood. Both the Tories and the Scottish National party need to be held to account for their failure to progress the deal, having so far failed even to agree on the outcomes they want it to deliver. The two Governments seem more focused on arguing about constitutional issues. The UK Government lack oversight of what the money they committed is being used for. Put simply, the Tories do not care enough about the deal to monitor it and press for progress.

The development of the Glasgow city deal and other Scottish city deals is evidently not a priority for the UK Government. That is fittingly exemplified by the fact that no one from the Scotland Office, which I named in my application for the debate, bothered to turn up, and that the Minister for the northern powerhouse, which is a position designed for the north of England, was dispatched to respond instead. That begs the question: what is the Scotland Office actually doing beyond hosting the occasional soirée in Dover House? It has shown a lack of leadership on this vital growth opportunity for our cities in Scotland.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Before the hon. Gentleman was elected, the problem we had with getting Scotland Office Ministers to appear in this Chamber was that there was only one Government MP representing a Scottish constituency and the Secretary of State does not normally appear here. Given that he is now joined on the Government Benches by an illustrious array of talent from Scotland, is it not time that a Scotland Office Minister came to this Chamber?

Mr Sweeney: I thank my honourable colleague from the great city of Glasgow for that observant intervention. I welcome the fact that some Scottish Conservative Members are here. It is just a shame that none of them are deemed worthy of holding the position of Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, which, bizarrely, was given to someone who failed to be elected to the House and sits in the other place.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con) rose—

Mr Sweeney: Perhaps you would like to bid for the job, sir.

Bill Grant: This is not a bid for the job, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. May I go back to what we knew as the GARL—the Glasgow airport rail link? The Strathclyde Partnership for Transport was heavily involved in that—in fact, the route was mapped out. Does he recall that that was shelved not by the SPT but by the Scottish Government?

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. Since the UK Government provided half the capital for the city deal—cash that was contingent on a no vote in the 2015 referendum—it appears that the SNP Scottish Government are at best apathetic about the progress and success of the deal and are therefore dragging their feet and putting nationalism ahead of the national interest and of the interests of Glaswegians. There is no better example of that than the way in which power was ripped away from the SPT and centralised in Transport Scotland. There has been a total lack of progress in infrastructure investment in Glasgow, particularly in the Glasgow metro rail network, which was built by the Strathclyde region. There has been no substantial investment to expand the network since the end of the Strathclyde region and the centralisation of transport powers under Transport Scotland.

The Glasgow airport rail link was scrapped in 2008, and there was a fire sale of the land—a scorched earth policy—that would have allowed it to happen. We struggle to see how we can revive that deal, because all the infrastructure that was put in place to achieve it was sold off in that fire sale by John Swinney. There is also a threat to the Crossrail scheme in Glasgow, which is vital for unifying the city region’s rail network. Transport
Scotland has actually demanded its removal from the city region plan, which would open up the land for the construction of housing.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I will avoid the theatrics that some others have used. The hon. Gentleman talks about the danger posed to Crossrail. Does he accept that, under a previous administration, Glasgow City Council granted permission for 800 houses where Crossrail would have gone? I do not think he is in strong territory.

Mr Sweeney: I do not accept that at all. The high street curve area was protected until June last year, after the change in administration. It was actually Transport Scotland—[Interruption.] No, the planning application was not before that. I am the only Member of Parliament who raised an objection to that planning application, which went to the city council only last month. Crossrail was enabled in the city region development plan, but it was removed from the latest edition of the plan in June last year at the demand of Transport Scotland. That is why a planning application went in that threatens the delivery of the Crossrail scheme, which is a vital project for Glasgow. I urge all Glasgow city region Members of Parliament to get behind it. We need to protect and safeguard the route for Crossrail. It is a critical project that should be funded by the Glasgow city region city deal, and it is another example of how dysfunctional and disjointed the whole administration of the deal has been.

At a time when public money is tight, it is unacceptable that the involvement of two Governments—in Edinburgh and London—can lead to a stalemate in the progress of the Glasgow city deal and a failure to draw up and implement a strategy for investing the allocated funds. The Tories and the SNP must get a grip if our urban areas are ever to catch up with and exceed the ambition of their English peers.

In an evaluation of their progress in 2016, the Fraser of Allander Institute commented that the three city deals that existed in Scotland at the time “could have an important impact in increasing urban productivity, and increasing the culture of partnership and innovation in these...city regions,” but “many more steps remain,” and that for cities in Scotland to move forward, “they need to be empowered—with additional roles, funding and competencies, because they will need and are best-placed to identify their infrastructure investment requirements, especially in transport and housing.”

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My constituency is not lucky enough to have a city deal yet—they are still under negotiation in Clackmannanshire and, in the form of the Tay cities deal, in Perth and Kinross. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that devolution does not mean separate? Edinburgh should pass more powers down to local authorities and work constructively with Westminster, so that we get more transparency about these deals and actually get the money to the communities where it is needed sooner rather than later.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which was timely because I am just about to address the question of municipalism in Scotland—a great tradition that is sadly diminished.

To achieve those recommendations by the Fraser of Allander Institute, we need substantially greater powers to act at municipal level, which the Glasgow city deal shows are sorely lacking. It is fair to say that Glasgow has been progressively smothered by the process of devolution in the past 20 years. Edinburgh holds too much power. It sucks up power from other parts of the country, including Glasgow. The SNP has only exacerbated the problem by drastically cutting funding to local government at twice the rate the Scottish budget has been reduced. Rebranding the city council as a city government is just dressing mutton up as lamb, because without any substantive changes to Glasgow’s real political power it is nothing more than changing the letterhead on the city council stationery. We need to appraise honestly how devolution can better support our great cities towards more responsive, representative government, rather than increasingly concentrating power in Edinburgh.

The north of England has been invigorated by a multimillion pound investment and innovative development through its city deals. Historically Britain’s second city, Glasgow is now at risk of losing out in terms of power and investment compared with other big, regional cities in the UK. City regions such as Manchester and Liverpool have made great gains in funding, voice and influence in recent years, including through the introduction of directly elected metro mayoralities. That greater devolution of power is to be celebrated, and Glasgow, which is bigger than each of those cities in northern England, needs to learn from the recent experience of cities such as Manchester to bring more power and investment to our great city. We need to ensure that Glasgow, as one of the greatest cities in the world, and once the fourth-largest city in Europe, has a greater and distinctive voice within the UK. We should be exploring all avenues for how we increase our political clout to improve the lives of Glaswegians.

The city deal appears to be a temporary fix to underlying structural issues for funding the Glasgow city region, which over recent decades has been both ravaged by a decade of SNP cuts and undermined by the Tory break-up of what it saw as a troublesome Labour-led Strathclyde regional council in the 1990s. I hope that the debate will force the Government to provide much-needed clarity on the future progress of the longest-standing Scottish city deal, the Glasgow and Clyde Valley city region deal.

The UK Government need to be proactive in pushing for progress while putting pressure on the SNP Government in Holyrood to deliver their commitments. As has been mentioned in interventions, we need to establish unity of purpose to ensure that the right projects are prioritised so that Glasgow finally gets the vital, world-class infrastructure it needs to thrive as a global destination in the 21st century, without further delay and procrastination. The current deal clearly shows that we cannot trust the UK Government to deliver on their financial commitments, we cannot trust the Scotland Office to show leadership, and we cannot trust the Scottish Government to implement their commitments properly.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is that not proof that the deal was not fully thought-through by the UK Government at the start? Instead,
it was a pre-referendum bribe, with them throwing out the money without laying out what the outcomes were going to be.

Mr Sweeney: I do not accept that it was done in that manner, cynically put as it was. I think it was put together with the best of intentions, but it has been managed incompetently. Both Parliaments and both Governments are to blame for the lack of oversight. I hope that both Parliaments will rediscover a spirit of co-operation on this issue and reappraise and reboot the city deal to ensure that we get the best effect for the people of Glasgow. I have been elected to do that, and I am going to ensure that that happens.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is a good friend of mine, and I understand that, as the sole Labour MP in Glasgow—on a wafer-thin majority—he has a job to do. The SNP has been in administration in Glasgow for less than 12 months, while his party presided over the deal for three years. Is there no responsibility on the part of his colleagues in Glasgow city chambers?

Mr Sweeney: Glasgow City Council has been pressing valiantly to deliver projects such as the Glasgow airport rail link, but it has been thwarted at every turn by Transport Scotland. Why? Because municipal power has been progressively ripped out of city councils across Scotland by the Scottish Government. [Interruption.] It happened in 2008, when SPT was denuded of any executive transport planning powers. It has the capacity to do it.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. It is great to have so much enthusiasm in the room, but I remind Members that any comments should be made through the Chair.

Mr Sweeney: Thank you, Ms McDonagh. I shall conclude by putting two direct questions to the Minister. What will he do to ensure that city deals in Scotland are properly delivered and to ensure the deals bring the hoped-for benefits to the city regions? What discussion has he had with the Scottish Government about enhancing the Glasgow city region’s political power in concert with the city deal, as has happened in other UK cities to their benefit? Will he show us some of the leadership lacking in the Scotland Office by committing to raise those issues with the Scottish Government without delay?

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing this hugely important debate. The Government welcome the opportunity to talk about the huge success that Scotland’s city deals are already delivering for all seven of the major cities in Scotland, and will deliver in future.

I am slightly disappointed that the hon. Gentleman is so upset that I am responding to the debate. I am the Minister for the northern powerhouse—for most people in the Chamber, I guess that is the far-southern powerhouse—but I am also Minister for local growth, and it is my cities and local growth team, on behalf of the Government, in partnership with the Secretary of State for Scotland and his civil servants, who have negotiated many of these city deals. I hope today to bring to the debate not just the experience we have had in government of negotiating city deals in Scotland but other experience.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the huge success of the English city devolution programme. We have seen huge steps forward in places such as the West Midlands, which now has a Mayor for its combined authority, as well as Liverpool and Manchester—and, in particular, the Tees Valley. There are important lessons we can learn across our United Kingdom, both from this debate and, more generally, about how devolution—taking real power, money and influence away from Westminster and returning it to the hands of people in local communities to drive forward their own growth—can transform our economy.

Before I get to the main part of the debate, I want to put on record my congratulations to Scotland’s rugby team, who absolutely battered England at Murrayfield on Saturday. I was there, and it was a great privilege. It was not a great result from my point of view, but it was good to be at the match. It shows that sometimes the best team wins, and the team with the best spirit also wins. I therefore congratulate Scotland on winning back the Calcutta cup—after 10 years.

I would like to celebrate the achievements and successes we have seen in our city deals. An additional £1 billion of UK Government investment and funding is going into local growth priorities in Scotland, which has been matched by £1 billion put forward by the Scottish Government, with additional investment from local authorities, universities and—let us not forget it, because it has not yet been mentioned in the debate—the private sector, which together brought forward a further £835 million. That shows that when city deals, and devolution and growth deals, are at their most successful, they are a partnership of equals between the UK Government, the Scottish Government, Scottish local authorities, the private sector and, of course, our colleagues in the public sector.

As we set out in our industrial strategy White Paper last November, the Government are committed to driving forward growth across the whole of the United Kingdom. It is about helping areas to achieve their full potential by building on local sector strengths that attract investment and supporting local businesses to grow. The city and growth deals that we have already negotiated and those that we have committed to negotiate in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are absolutely central to that ambition. Moreover, they show how the Government can work hand in hand with partners in the devolved Administrations across our United Kingdom and local authorities to deliver, in a co-ordinated way, real impacts for local economies.

The first Scottish city deal was agreed in 2014, three years after the then coalition Government launched the first groundbreaking English city deal. It was interesting to hear it referred to as a pre-referendum bribe. If SNP Members believe that—I do not believe it; the deal was about driving forward the city of Glasgow’s economy for the people who live there—I wonder why they signed up to it. Perhaps they can deal with that later.

The deals provide place-based solutions, building on local expertise to co-ordinate investment and policy, and interventions to help to drive economic growth.
Recognising that city deals, as piloted in England, could boost local economies across our United Kingdom, Her Majesty's Government and the Scottish Government agreed that the programme should be extended beyond England, to demonstrate our commitment to supporting dynamic businesses and local communities represented by devolved Administrations. We have agreed four deals across Scotland and are negotiating three more, meaning that we now have deals being either implemented or negotiated for each of Scotland's great seven cities. We are also working on a cross-border deal between Scotland and England, referred to as the borderlands deal, which was confirmed in the most recent Budget, to see how we can drive forward the ambitions and desires of businesses in the borderlands area of our United Kingdom.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): There has been a lot of talk specifically about city deals. On the Tay cities deal, which comes into my constituency, I just wanted to confirm that we will use as much pressure as possible to ensure that the deals cascade out into rural economies as well, because they need just as much support.

Jake Berry: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We should never forget that the majority of people in this country do not live in a city, but in towns, villages and rural communities. Therefore, every city deal and every growth deal that the Government negotiate, regardless of where it may be in our United Kingdom, has to be about driving forward the economies of areas outside cities, as well as in cities. I happily confirm that the hopes and desires of her constituents who do not live in a city will be part of that deal.

Alan Brown: The Minister touched on the borderlands growth deal. He will know where I am going with this: the Ayrshire growth deal was on the table before the borderlands growth deal, which now seems to be going forward. At the last Housing, Communities and Local Government questions he committed to meeting the backers of the Ayrshire growth deal. Has he progressed forward? At the last Housing, Communities and Local Government questions he committed to meeting the backers of the Ayrshire growth deal. Has he progressed forward?

Jake Berry: We are in conversations about dates that work. I have already met with the representatives of the Ayrshire growth deal. As I committed to in the Chamber following the hon. Gentleman’s question, I am happy to meet with them again to discuss what we can take forward and how we can work together on proposals that they may have for an Ayrshire growth deal. I will keep him informed about my diary, but I hope that he will not have to wait too long for the second meeting. I know that discussions are ongoing with my colleagues in the Scotland Office.

I turn to the achievements of some of the city deals that we have already agreed. The Glasgow and Clyde Valley deal was the first Scottish deal agreed, and included a joint £1 billion investment fund from both the UK and the Scottish Governments to support growth across the city region through a regionally controlled investment fund. Good progress continues to be made, with a number of key milestones already achieved. Significant funding—£209 million—has been approved, and many projects have been successfully completed. One example is the positive investment—some £89.3 million—of city deal funding to deliver the canal and north element of the Sighthill regeneration project, which is one of the biggest of its type outside London. I could not put the difference that the project will make better than the hon. Member for Glasgow North East. In one of his recent tweets, he said that the Sighthill regeneration project is “an incredible legacy for my constituency.”

Mr Sweeney: I accept that the Sighthill transformational regeneration area is a wonderful example of the city deal in action, but my point was that, given the lack of political power compared with the powers given to other city regions in the UK, we cannot progress critical infrastructure projects such as transport because those powers are no longer in the locus of the city region. Only when we have the powers to match the investment will we see real progress in areas such as infrastructure. Does the Minister not accept that we are seeing a lack of progress in those areas?

Jake Berry: I do not accept that the only point that the hon. Gentleman is seeking to make is that the region wants further political powers. He set out that there had been a lack of progress in the Glasgow city deal. I have pointed out a project that he himself has said will be “an incredible legacy for my constituency.” Some £89.3 million has already been drawn down into that project. That ably makes the point that the city deal is making progress, and shows the commitment of both the UK and Scottish Governments to driving forward the economy of Glasgow.

The city deal investment in the Sighthill regeneration project, which the hon. Gentleman acknowledges is a good legacy for his constituency, will fund connections between that area and the city centre. It will provide a significant economic boost to north Glasgow. In addition to the regionally managed investment fund, as part of the Glasgow city deal the Government have committed funding to specific innovation projects across the city region. Those projects have already begun to support small and medium-sized businesses with high-growth potential as part of our strategy to back Glasgow’s life sciences sector.

Among those projects is the world-leading Imaging Centre of Excellence, which is part of a £64 million investment in stratified medicine at the new south Glasgow hospitals campus. Again, that part of the city deal is drawn-down, completed and open, showing that the city deal is already delivering for the people of Glasgow.

It is a unique medical research facility, which will translate science into economic and patient benefits for the city of Glasgow, Scotland and the UK. The project will bring 396 new high-skilled, high-wage, high-value jobs to the city region over a seven-year period, and an independent assessor believes that it will contribute at least £88 million to the local economy—another demonstration of how the city deal in Glasgow is already delivering for people on the ground.

On the comment made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East about the delay to the rail link with the airport, I share his disappointment that the Scottish Government have failed to make proper progress...
Jake Berry: The hon. Lady makes a good point on behalf of her constituents, and I am sure that she will continue to drive that argument here in Westminster in representing them.

We have built on the success of the Glasgow deal. In 2016, we agreed a deal for both Aberdeen and Inverness. In Aberdeen, we now have the £180 million Oil and Gas Technology Centre—an industry-leading research and knowledge organisation, which is fast establishing its reputation.

David Linden: Does the Minister accept that the Aberdeen and shire city deal actually fell £254 million short on the UK Government side, compared with the Scottish Government side, and can he explain why the estimates document shows that £72 million is being surrendered to Her Majesty’s Treasury?

Jake Berry: On the subject of Aberdeen, I would have thought the hon. Gentleman would be celebrating the fact that the centre has invested in more than 70 projects in just 12 months to develop technology that could transform the North sea. I think it shows that we cannot cover the success of Scottish city deals in a half-hour debate. Perhaps there will be an opportunity to have another debate to cover Aberdeen, Inverness and other areas.

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting suspended.

UK Fisheries Policy

Mr Ian Paisley in the Chair

2.30 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered future UK fisheries policy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley.

I am sure right hon. and hon. Members know that the demise of our fishing industry under European Union membership was frequently discussed in the lead-up to the referendum in June 2016. Leaving the EU is a huge opportunity for UK fishing and for our fishermen, who need a positive vision of what can be achieved as a wholly sovereign nation. As we continue to debate and discuss what types of agreements and frameworks we should put in place for access to trade, we should not forget one of the easiest wins we can have from this whole process: taking back control of our fishing waters and handing them back to UK fishermen.

I commend the Minister, who gave great support to farmers and fishermen leading up to the referendum and continues to show diligent support to the fishing and farming communities. It is great to see the environment leading the way in Parliament and in the media, and I know the Minister will be fighting the corner for farmers and fishermen over at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, alongside the Secretary of State. I also know that he is currently working toward a new fisheries policy to be published in the next few months, and I hope that the contributions from right hon. and hon. Members today will help to shape that debate.

Brexit and fisheries in general should be considered in two phases: the implementation period and the end state. I will put on record my concerns about how an implementation or transition period could harm fishermen if not done correctly. Ideally, at 11 pm on 29 March 2019, we need to have absolute and 100% control of our fisheries, without it being part of any implementation or transition deal. If not, we could lock ourselves into future EU treaties and regulations, including the discard ban, which could see many of the boats that currently work in the UK going bankrupt.

One of the hardest things to see, as a member of the public, is dead fish being thrown back into the ocean due to a dysfunctional and rigid EU quota-based system. The discard ban could have huge ramifications for our fisheries. If, however, the Government enter into a transitional or implementation period that includes fisheries, there must be a clear and final termination clause so that the UK fishing fleet is not part of any EU treaty or regulation. We cannot be in a situation where we leave the EU for a few seconds and then join through the back door. I urge the Minister to stress those points to the Department for Exiting the European Union to ensure that fisheries are protected and treated separately.

On future fisheries policy, we need a system that no longer means our fishermen throwing tonnes of fish back into our oceans and our fishing fleet restricted by arbitrary quotas. We need a system based on sound science, and one which effectively monitors how many fish are being caught.
Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that any future fisheries policy needs to have buy-in from experts who work in the industry? Even I would not dictate to fishermen how the stocks should be managed. The fishermen themselves know best, and they should have input into a management system.

Scott Mann: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am sure she agrees that we need to look at the science, Government legislation and the industry. A holistic approach must be taken to ensure that our fishing industry is protected.

As I said, we need a system based on sound science, and one that effectively monitors how many fish are being caught, where they are being caught and what is being caught, so we can get an up-to-date and clear picture of the state of the current fishery and the health of the fish stocks within it. Throwing fish back into the sea gives distorted information and it is not good for conservation or for public perception. Only by landing everything we catch can we properly monitor our fisheries and implement appropriate fisheries measures to preserve stocks.

I know the Minister is aware of the work currently being undertaken by Fishing for Leave, the organisation that has set up a new fisheries model. I have met with the group recently, and it has shown me its proposals for an effort control system and a hybrid system. The organisation has modelled it, and it shows the principles of a time-at-sea model and a quota-based system. I will briefly explain what that means.

A time-at-sea model is already in place in places such as the Faroe Islands, but I do not believe we should look to replicate that exact model because a time-at-sea model generally allows for a race to the fish. Vessels therefore target the most valuable species closer to shore. Under Fishing for Leave’s proposals, we could have a system whereby fishermen were allocated an amount of net soak time over the course of a year and would be allowed a flexible catch composition quota target, which would stipulate how many of a specific species they should aim to catch as a percentage of their overall catch.

The clever part of that model is that the skipper, if he exceeds his catch limit, will have time at sea reduced equivalent to the value of the wrong species being caught. It is almost a reverse compensation measure—the skipper will not want to lose much time at sea, so it will be an incentive for him to go out and catch the species he wants to target. If after a couple of days at sea the skipper has exhausted his weekly allocation of hours used as time to compensate for that particular species, he will be on shore and losing time, and less fishing effort will be exerted on the overall fishery. That means that he will be able to land a nice, profitable catch of fish, spend more time at home with his family and to incur lower diesel and fuel costs at sea, and that the scientists will have lots of reliable data on which to base their information.

Under the current quota system, a boat could be out to sea for a number of days, trying to target a specific species and throwing away many dead fish of the wrong species. Further to that, under the proposed EU discard ban, a vessel would have to tie up after it exhausted the smallest quota number. Seafish modelling has shown that 60% of the UK’s fishing fleet would go bankrupt if we continued to enforce quotas while also enforcing a discard ban.

The Fishing for Leave model avoids the need for a discard ban and the risks that that would pose to fishermen. It also proposes countermeasures to ensure that some species are protected. By landing everything that is caught and monitoring where the boat is, we can harvest live data and know what is being caught and where. That will allow fishing authorities to determine accurately which species they need to protect or which areas need to be closed. When a boat goes to sea, it will have not only allocations of time and flexible catch composition quotas with catch limit sizes, but live data streaming telling it where it can fish, which species can be targeted and which authorities are responsible for developing those targets.

Of course, to make a time-at-sea model work, there must be a level playing field so that fishermen are measured by how long their nets are in the water. Within the model, that is known as net soak time. I know my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) introduced a days-at-sea model when it was trialled previously. I believe that that model was flawed because it did not include the net soak time data, so we were not able to see that boats were targeting species close to the shore rather than those species they were supposed to be going for.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is not one of the big wins from this excellent scheme that we will not only land and eat more fish and have more output, but catch far fewer fish? That is great for the fish as well as for the fishermen and the fish-eaters.

Scott Mann: I will come on to that point as I get through the rest of my speech—my right hon. Friend has pre-empted one of my thought processes.

Not only will boats not overfish inshore, as has happened in the Faroe Islands, but it will also bring another significant point to fruition: the days-at-sea proposal tended to lead to the targeting of fish within estuaries. We have seen significant pressure on our estuarine species. There is a much wider point here about estuaries and the ecosystems that exist within them.

I congratulate the Cornwall Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority on implementing a netting ban in a protected area in Cornwall to try to protect some of the species there. People target fish inshore because they face so much competition for the fish in the offshore reaches—they may not have negotiated as much of a quota as they think they are entitled to.

Under the time-at-sea model, all nets would have net soak time sensors, which would measure how long nets are in the water. As soon as the nets are deployed, the sensor would kick in and an on-board computer would start measuring how long the net is in the water for. That would allow fishermen to travel to their desired location without having their time deducted. I understand that the Secretary of State saw that technology on a recent visit to North Shields. When a haul is brought back on board, the crew can record every fish that is caught, and provide live accurate data for the authorities to calculate what the fishery looks like, creating a picture of stock sizes, species, maturity and sustainable yield.
Currently, under the common fisheries policy, thousands of tonnes of fish are thrown back into the water. That means wasted time, effort and cost for crews, millions of dead fish not being put to market, and less data for scientists and authorities. If we implement the model, I believe it can only be good for our fishery. Fishermen would hit the targets that they need to be viable, because they will be able to land everything they have caught. Meanwhile, the total number of fish being caught would be lower, because we would not be in a situation in which millions of fish are caught, killed and thrown back as fishermen pursue species for which they have not hit their quota.

I want us to conserve stocks and maintain a healthy and diverse fishery. This hybrid model can achieve that. I urge the Minister and his officials to meet Fishing for Leave to look at its model and the website it has built, which shows the process of how a fisherman can record catches and work within the current system. That said, it should not be the only fisheries management tool we should be look at—we should look at different models that could be appropriate to determine what is in Britain’s best interest and create our own waters again. Further to that, I urge the Minister to consider holding trials so he can pit all the models against each other. That would give a much better picture of the models, and we could see which was preferred and how it needed to be adapted to meet our needs.

That leads me on to how we can revitalise our fishing industry. This is a much wider point. As we travel around the UK, we see many former fishing communities, and we see at first hand the damage done by the common fisheries policy. I believe that the UK economy has been unbalanced for years. Globalisation has benefited urban areas, but that wealth rarely trickled down to rural coastal communities. That disparity was highlighted by the referendum result, but we now have an opportunity to rebalance UK plc. Through an effective fisheries policy, we can create jobs, increase productivity in coastal communities and bring life back to some of the coastal towns that have suffered.

It is also important that we consider the effects of post-Brexit trade deals on our fishing industry. At the moment, up to 60% of the fish caught in UK waters are exported to EU countries and further afield. I should imagine that the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Department for International Trade, which will oversee the future terms of our trade in fish, will look at this important policy and take into account how the industry exports.

It is right that we have a period of time and a policy in place that accommodates foreign boats in British waters and, likewise, British boats in European waters. In the spirit of co-operation with Europe, we should not want to shut the door on them immediately, but we should reach some sort of agreement where all our catches are landed through the UK.

**Scott Mann:** I absolutely agree on enforcement. I am sure the Minister listened to that and will respond in his own way. I understand that we have not been particularly good at enforcing our own fishery. Our fishermen need that confidence to move forward.

**Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): On that point, some very large trawlers make their way into the Irish sea. They start at the very southern tip of the Irish sea and work their way right up. They are not necessarily from Great Britain—I am talking about the Spanish trawlers that come in and lift everything out of the sea in that area, leaving absolutely nothing after they have left. They can trawl right up to the beaches. We need protection zones within this policy.

**Scott Mann:** I absolutely agree with that, too. The hon. Gentleman very well sums up the conversations that I have with my fishermen, who also feel the pressure from foreign boats off the 12-mile zone.

It is important to me that, when Britain takes control of its waters, it sets its own terms of access. We want our fishermen to be confident that, in post-Brexit Britain, we will have control of our territorial waters and that we will be able to export our fish to European countries and further afield without tariffs. If we leave the EU without a trade deal and are under World Trade Organisation rules, the tariffs for exporting seafood to the EU generally range from 0% to 24%. Both fresh cod and prawns currently attract a 12% tariff. For European economic area countries such as Norway, cod has a zero tariff, while prawns have a 12% tariff.

If we get a free trade deal, tariff barriers will not be a problem. I would certainly welcome that. On the other hand, we may face a situation in which the EU will settle for zero tariffs only if we give it some access to British waters. That question will need to be considered very carefully by the Minister and the fishing industry in general.

There is a disparity between the amount of fish we import and the amount we export. We currently export a staggering amount of fish and shellfish that could perfectly well be eaten within the UK. Approximately 52% of the seafood that enters the UK supply chain is imported from abroad or is landed by foreign boats. For example, nearly all spider crabs caught off the Cornish coastline are currently exported to Europe, with fishermen exporting 98% of all the crabs we catch. I want to know what is wrong with those crabs. Brown crabs are a fantastic species to eat, and we should celebrate the spider crab, which is a fantastic-tasting species—many restaurants in France regularly serve spider crabs. Likewise, we catch a fantastic collection of cuttlefish that is also exported. We must continue to import and export to serve demand from Europe, but there is certainly a case to be made for more British-caught produce.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Has the hon. Gentleman considered the problem of non-tariff barriers? I sit on the Exiting the European Union Committee. We were in Brussels last week, and the Norwegian ambassador was very keen to impress upon us that one main reason why Norway is in the single market is to avoid non-tariff barriers on its fish exports.

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that the Department starts to plan now for the fisheries protection part of the regaining of our waters, and creates that level of interest and robustness in future, so that fishermen can have confidence that the UK will be able to support the final position?
Scott Mann: I take that point. Tariffs need to be looked at within the context of our Brexit policies right across the board, rather than just for fishing or agriculture.

If it is ultimately the case that the EU imposes tariffs on our seafood, there is an argument for Britain to become much more self-sustaining. We need to broaden our range and knowledge of seafood and encourage its consumption. I therefore urge the Minister to consider drawing up a strategy, either within a future fisheries policy or a separate policy, on how to encourage more British people to embrace seafood and try the different ranges of fish and shellfish that are caught on their doorstep.

The Minister is aware of the practice of electric pulse fishing, which is undertaken by Dutch trawlers. Given the likely negative impact that it is having on our fishery and our ecosystem, will he assure me that, under a future British fisheries policy, electric pulse fishing will be completely banned?

Taking back control of our fisheries was a huge issue during the referendum, but it has since taken a back seat. I hope we can put it back in the spotlight. The 29 March 2019 deadline is fast approaching, and we need a system that is ready to go. We need to be out of the common fisheries policy and out from under the auspices of the EU.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his excellent speech. One issue that the fishing community are very concerned about is the continued use of European boats in our waters if it is not made absolutely clear when we leave that we have our fishing waters back. I believe there is a continued-use element whereby they could claim that they were still allowed to fish here. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister could inform us, or perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) knows, how far that part of the negotiations has got and how clear it is that when we leave, we get our fishing waters back.

Scott Mann: My understanding is that, once we leave, we fall back on the UN convention on the law of the sea, which means that we control our 200-mile territorial zone, but I would refer that question to the Minister to be answered in full. As we leave the common fisheries policy and the auspices of the EU, we should have 100% control of our waters, with our own fishing system in place that better serves our fishermen and is fairer to our fishery.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the first Opposition spokesman no later than 3.25 pm. With that in mind, I will not set a formal time limit yet, because you are all such good and obedient Members that you will keep your comments, I hope, to just below four minutes. I call Mr Jim Shannon.

2.51 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your authority, Mr Paisley. I did not expect to be called first. I was hoping for more than four minutes, but that is by the bye; I will work to your guidelines.

I thank the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for initiating the debate and giving this chance to those of us who represent constituencies where fishing is important. I know that every fifth word in this place seems to be “Brexit”. That term was unknown five years ago, but now the very state of the UK depends on the success of Brexit and the negotiating team. That is one job that I would not want to have, and I thank those who are so diligently putting in the work to make the exit from the EU as smooth and rewarding as possible. I look forward to the Minister’s contribution today. I know that it will be very positive, as it always is. Who would have thought when we joined what was purported to be no more than a trade and customs group that we would be in this position today? The lesson is clear: sovereignty is easy to let slip through our fingers, but infinitely harder to regain.

One of the industries that have been worst affected by a biased Europe is fishing. I had in my area a tremendous working fishing village in Portavogie, with two fish-producing factories and 120 boats. That is now down to 70. Why did that happen? Because of the European bureaucracy imposing quotas and days at sea—all the things that made fishing not work. At the same time, the Irish sea abounds with cod, yet all the scientists in Brussels, who never get off a warm seat, have the audacity to tell us that there is no cod there when there clearly is. The people who know that are the people who fish the sea. There are, therefore, very big issues to address.

When the nation voted to leave, the fishermen rejoiced. Indeed, every man, woman and unborn child in Portavogie voted to leave, because there was no doubt that that was what they wanted to happen. Nobody in Portavogie wanted to stay in Europe, and my constituency clearly reflected that opinion because a majority voted to leave. Our seas will be ours again. We will be able to thrive. We can pass our trade on to our families. We can hire the wonderful Filipino fishermen, who so greatly enhance our crews with their skill, dedication and commitment to our community, without the impossible red tape that forces us to take on European workers who do not have the same skill set or mindset. We can sell our products to our people at decent, affordable prices, which will benefit the restaurants and the consumers alike. However, the March 2019 deadline is striding towards us, and as yet our fishermen have none of the certainty that they crave and, indeed, deserve. Again, we look to the Minister for some confirmation in that regard.

I, along with many others in the Chamber, have seen the letter sent to the Prime Minister by the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation. The letter clearly outlines the needs of the fishing community and the villages and towns that rely on that community. It is crystal clear about the need for an immediate red line around our waters and the ability for fishermen to be just that: men who fish, and women who fish, without being used as political pawns. I for one do not see the families of Portavogie and surrounding areas or the families of Kilkeel or Ardglass as expendable. I see them as people who voted to leave, along with the majority of the United Kingdom, and who therefore deserve to leave at the same time as everyone else, in March 2019. No one has been fooled by the most recent Brussels fishing convention, which saw our quota increase, just in the
last year. The fact is that Europe puts the true Europeans first. We are leaving and we are looking forward to the day when we do just that.

I am standing in this Chamber today to say that we cannot give a sop to the Europeans. For too long, they have controlled British waters with anti-British policies. That must end in March 2019. Would that it could end in March 2018. Boy, that would be an even bigger day. The cries of joy and relief would be heard from the most easterly port of Ballyhalbert right across the Irish sea to the coast of Scotland, where the Scottish nationalists would also want to take note of the message that was coming through very clearly. Their fishing communities would be echoing those cries.

Fishing is not a sop; it has been the lifeblood of coastal communities and other, supplementary industries and it has the potential to be so again. We must extricate ourselves from the EU muddle and do what is right. Leave means leave now, and that is exactly what we are demanding of the Minister.

2.55 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): There is growing concern among the members of the fishing community in west Cornwall, including the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation, about the terms of the UK Government’s proposed implementation period for Brexit and the potentially disastrous implications for the fishing industry. That is why I give particular credit to my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for securing such a timely debate for our fishing industry. We never seem to have enough time to discuss this very important subject.

It is imperative that the UK Government confirm and demonstrate their commitment to leaving the common fisheries policy, and that commitment can be clearly demonstrated only by ensuring that fishing is not part of any transition or implementation deal and by the UK taking full responsibility for British waters on 29 March 2019. The entire UK fishing industry and its many supporters would consider a failure by the UK immediately to assert control of UK waters and manage fisheries as an independent coastal state extremely damaging. It would certainly be unacceptable to the Cornish fishermen I know and meet regularly.

It is clear that it would be a complete disaster for the UK to hand responsibility for its waters straight back to Brussels at the point of Brexit. In fact, it would be worse than an extension of the status quo, because we would be powerless to prevent French, Belgian, Dutch and other EU fleets from continuing to operate in UK waters and catch the fisheries resource there, under rules that they had decided without the UK having any say at all. The sector has been consistent and unambiguous in its expectation that full control over access to UK waters and management of our fisheries as an independent coastal state genuinely begins from March 2019, when we withdraw from the EU and CFP. An implementation period may make sense for some business sectors, but for the fisheries sector it would be disastrous.

The Cornish Fish Producers Organisation has set out a number of real and important reasons why fishing should not be part of a transition or implementation deal with the EU. I am sure that many hon. Members in the Chamber are aware of the things that the organisation has said. Logically, fisheries jurisdiction, access rights and quota shares should be dealt with separately from trade arrangements when the UK’s legal status in relation to fisheries changes on 29 March 2019. Norway, for example, maintains access to the EU single market under specific agreed arrangements, but it manages the fisheries within its own exclusive economic zone and enters into annual agreements on the management of shared stocks and quota exchanges as an independent coastal state. It is patently obvious that once the principle of the status quo on quota shares and access has been conceded for a transitional deal, the EU will use the same tactics and leverage when the UK seeks to negotiate a long-term trade deal with the EU. Fishing will again be a sacrificed pawn, irrespective of our legal status as an independent coastal state.

At the point at which the UK leaves the EU, in March 2019, UK Ministers and officials will no longer be party to decisions within any of the European institutions, including those that set quotas and make other rules on EU fisheries. It is an extreme understatement to say that it would be completely prejudicial to the interests of the UK fishing industry to tie us into fisheries management decisions in which we in the UK are mere rule takers. As an independent coastal state, the UK would be expected to take its seat in international fisheries negotiations, including those with Norway, other coastal states and the EU. Even the European Commission recognises that separate, bespoke arrangements will be required to include the UK in the decisions when setting total allowable catches in the annual year-end negotiations.

There is no legal or fisheries management reason why the UK should accept any precondition or artificial constraint on its right to negotiate the best deal that it can, including on access arrangements and quota share. I accept that a one-off, stand-alone arrangement for fishing in 2019 might be necessary, given that the UK leaves a quarter of the way through the fishing year, but it is essential that we leave the CFP this time early next year.

2.59 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate. It is an all too infrequent opportunity to discuss the health of our fishing industry.

This is a moment of great significance for our fishing communities. For decades the operation of the common fisheries policy has been centralised, bureaucratic and unresponsive. We now have the opportunity to do things better. Other hon. Members have spoken about what will happen at the point of departure from the European Union—29 March 2019. It is a matter on which I have questioned the Prime Minister twice and I have had a somewhat less than unambiguous answer. Will the Minister make clear what is going to happen? Other hon. Members have suggested that 29 March will be the end of it and we will be completely out of the common fisheries policy. The position of the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation is that, having signed up to a year’s arrangements in December 2018, we would then honour those for the
remainder of that period, which they call a bridging period, from March until December. That would offer the industry some of the certainty and smooth regulation that it craves.

It has to be clearly understood at the very heart of Government that any arrangement that would mean that UK fisherman continued to be bound by quota or total allowable catch arrangements made at the December Agriculture and Fisheries Council, which they had not been part of, would be totally unacceptable. We need to hear that from the Minister today. We need to hear it in the clearest possible terms.

I would like to hear the Minister’s view on the constitutional framework that is in place under the devolution settlement. Decisions currently made on fisheries management in Europe should, for my fishermen in Shetland and Orkney, be made in Edinburgh. That is the constitutional framework that comes from the various Scotland Acts. There is no good reason why we should anticipate anything different.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall spoke about the possibility of moving to an effort control system—a mixed quota and effort control system based on days at sea. These are all interesting ideas worthy of consideration. A move away from the quota system would be immensely problematic for the fisherman in my constituency and, I suspect, for those represented by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid). Many in the Scottish fleet have invested hundreds millions of pounds over the years in relation to the quota system. If there is to be any change, it has to be made with consummate care.

We can have any system in the world that we want, but it will fail if it does not do two things: first, if it does not have the co-operation and confidence of the fishing industry itself; secondly, if it does not operate on the basis of science that is properly reflective of the stocks that are in the sea. One of the big failings of the common fisheries policy in recent years is a growing divergence between scientists and fishermen, because much of the data that are used in making quota and total allowable catch decisions is two years old by the time that it is implemented. There has to be some quick and dirty way that that data can be analysed and used much more effectively to inform decision making. There is a great deal more that I would like to say, but time is not on my side. The important questions are already with the Minister. I look forward to hearing his answers.

3.4 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate.

Lowestoft in my constituency was previously the fishing capital of the southern North sea; today it is a pale shadow of its former self. Brexit provides an opportunity to revitalise fishing off the East Anglian coast, and to maximise the economic and social benefits that the industry can bring to local communities and businesses in ports such as Lowestoft. I shall briefly outline the three ingredients required to bring about this renaissance, for which the forthcoming fisheries Bill must provide.

First, East Anglian fisherman must be given the opportunity to catch more fish. The region’s catch sector predominantly comprises the inshore fleet which, as has been well documented, does not get a fair slice of the cake. Moreover, we suffer from the worst excesses of the flagship debacle, with six vessels of the Lowestoft Fish Producers Organisation never coming near the port and landing their catches in the Netherlands and in Peterhead.

If the quota system is to continue, we need a radical reallocation in favour of locally based fisherman, so that they can earn a fair living and the full benefit of their hard work, often carried out in extremely harsh conditions, can be secured for the ports and communities in which they live and work. Secondly, going hand in hand with landing more fish in East Anglian ports, we need to invest in the infrastructure, skills and supply-chain businesses in those ports and the surrounding areas. While in many respects it is surprising how much of this supporting sector remains in Lowestoft and other East Anglian ports, my concern is that it does not have the capacity to cope with a significant increase in landing. The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund runs until 2020. Beyond that date it is necessary for the Government to assess the likely needs of the industry on a regional basis, then make the necessary funds available for a wide range of projects.

The research work to establish what is needed in East Anglia is now under way. The level of funding should at least match the current EU structural funds for fishing. It represents a good investment in UK plc. It will secure a good deal for coastal communities, providing a more diverse and secure economic base. It will help to rebalance the national economy in favour of areas that have suffered a great deal in recent decades. Finally, it is necessary to put in place a management system that has the full confidence and respect of all those working in the industry. This system must be based on science and it should be local, sustainable and collaborative.

In conclusion, we have a great opportunity to revitalise a uniquely British industry for the benefit of local communities that feel that they have been dispossessed and ignored for too long. This task will not be easy, as the industry differs in its make-up and needs around the country. We require a national policy framework that has the flexibility to respond to different demands, so as to allow the industry to flourish locally, all around the UK coast. I look forward to welcoming the Minister to Lowestoft next month, so that he can set out his vision for this national framework, and so that locally we can set about the task of providing that local plan that will enable the industry again to play a leading role in the East Anglian coastal economy.

3.8 pm

**Ian Paisley** (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Aldous—top of the class. I call Huw Merriman.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you, Mr Paisley. It is a pleasure to be called to speak. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for securing this debate. If ever there was an industry that showed us the benefits of the UK leaving the European Union, it is the fisheries industry. In 2015, trawlers from EU member states took 683,000 tonnes from UK waters, whereas the UK fleet took 111,000 tonnes from member states’ waters, so we can clearly see the disparity. In the English
channel, which is near my constituency, 84% of the cod quota is given to the French, leaving just 9% to the UK. The Danish trawling fleet takes 85% of all its fish from UK waters, so this is a fantastic opportunity that we should embrace.

Unfortunately, the inshore waters off of East Sussex, which I represent, have barely any fish. For that reason, I support the bid from the marine conversation zone for a new zone to be set up for Beachy Head East, which would run from Beachy Head lighthouse to Hastings pier. It has the huge support of my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd). That area of water, which would run out for six nautical miles, is rich in marine biodiversity, but unfortunately the trawlers that have taken their catch have also taken absolutely everything else. That was brought home to us locally when a sea angling competition caught no sea bass whatever, despite that being the target of the catch. Although I am hugely optimistic for our policy post Britain leaving the European Union, I ask the Minister to note the words, “Beachy Head East marine conservation zone application” and the support for a new zone to be set up for Beachy Head East, which I support the bid from the marine conversation zone for which I represent, have barely any fish. For that reason, should embrace.

I fully support the effort control system proposed by Fishing for Leave, and I hope the Minister and the Secretary of State will look at that. What we do not want during the implementation period is somehow get dragged along with a perpetual CFP. We have the opportunity for a Brexit dividend. We have an opportunity to take back control of our seas and to rejuvenate our local fishing communities. I call on the Government to exempt fishing from any transition deal. Really importantly, we need unilaterally to ban pulse beaming, which has been catastrophic on spawning areas, particularly against our demersal species.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I am not imposing a formal time limit, but I ask Members to try to keep their speeches short.

3.14 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Brexit creates a unique and golden opportunity to rejuvenate a multibillion pound industry for our nation. It is an opportunity, should we successfully grasp it, to create a sustainable and successful fishing industry such as those of Norway, Iceland and the Faroes. I am sure all coastal Members received a communication from the Minister with responsibility for coastal communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), about round five of the coastal communities fund, totalling £40 million. That is hugely welcome and I hope to promote bids from South Thanet, but we have in our coastal communities, on our doorstep, especially my own, the ability to bring real added value to communities without additional help from the Government, welcome as it is.

A fishing industry that in 1950 employed 48,000 people is now down to just 12,000 people today. An added lunacy is that this country, described by Aneurin Bevan in 1945 as an island “made mainly of coal and surrounded by fish”, now imports 238,000 tonnes of fish a year worth £1.3 billion. We have a trade deficit in fish alone of more than a quarter of a billion pounds. Whichever way we measure the CFP, it has been an environmental, ecological and financial disaster. In 2012, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee found that 1.7 million tonnes of good fish were discarded annually across the EU: some 23% of the catch. In a world of want, that represents not only a moral outrage but an ecological disgrace. If the CFP is bad for our industry, it is even worse for our fish.

I do not know how the Fisheries Minister manages to be so cheerful when he goes to Brussels every December. I would guess he doesn’t. We face a total allowable catch allocation of quotas that bears little relation to what is on the ground. I speak to my local fishermen and they say there is an abundance of thornback ray, which is lumped together in the EU-wide skates and rays analysis as a whole. The EU considers skates and rays to be at risk, so our quota is remarkably low.

We have had problems with sea bass. A lot of my local fishermen who have not been able to catch sea bass have undertaken recreational fishing by taking day anglers out. In the first six months of the year, we are not even allowed to catch and release, let alone catch and keep. My fleet in South Thanet in Ramsgate is in the under 10-metre class. I propose that it receive the most light touch regulations, if not wide-ranging exemptions. It is completely environmentally friendly. It barely dents the stocks and it presents the most benefit to coastal communities. Such fleets represent 70% of the UK fleet, employ 65% of those working in UK fishing, yet they receive 4% of the total quota.

Now is an exciting time for British fishing. As we move through the process of leaving the EU and the CFP, Brexit provides a sea of opportunity for the fishing industry, but we need to maintain stability and security for our fishermen in the short term. Any radical shift in policy taken at this stage must be very carefully considered, and we should look to best practice abroad when deliberating on the way forward.

It was interesting to hear the example of the Faroe Islands, which I understand are moving away from the current effort-based system because they believe it has proven to be a contributory factor to the decline of their stocks. As I understand it, they depart from the effort-based system on 1 January 2019, as agreed by their Parliament last year. The Faroese Government stated:

“Small fishing vessels which conduct coastal fisheries on a smaller scale will, however, continue to base their activity on annually allocated fishing days.”

It is a hybrid approach that might be appropriate in some cases.
It is worth noting the great success that the Scottish fleet has had recently in rebuilding the number of stocks, including North sea cod. That has all been achieved within the current quota-based system. There has been broad agreement over the past few months on both sides of the debate that if we are to move towards an effort-based system, it should be piloted first on a small-scale fishery. If that shows promising results, it would surely confirm once and for all whether that is a way forward.

Iceland uses an effort-based system only for some stocks, specifically lumpfish and sea urchins. All other fishing is operated on a rights-based system. Effort-based systems are viewed over there as a useful way to manage small-scale targeted fisheries, not large-scale mixed fisheries. Of course, around the United Kingdom we have one of the largest, if not the largest, mixed fisheries in the world. Because of that, it is important to recognise that not all fisheries are made equal. Mixed fisheries in the northern North sea are vastly different from fisheries in other parts of Scotland, let alone the rest of the UK.

I want us to continue with the drive towards regionalisation that the UK Government have previously supported in a European context. Why stop at Edinburgh, for example, when it comes to Scotland? Where exactly we draw the line is something we will have to be clear about as we go through the process of leaving the EU and the CFP, but ideally the resource should always be managed by those closest to it, and, as other hon. Members have said, with the input of those who know the fisheries best: the fishermen themselves. I would like to see all fisheries managed at the point most local to the fishery, with the exception of some high-level decisions that will need to be taken at a UK-wide level, especially as we become a fully independent coastal state.

3.18 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I will try to be as brief as my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), Mr Paisley.

As I have said, any management system must have buy-in from the industry and must also be flexible enough to allow for massive fluctuations in stocks, such as the massive fluctuation in the bass stocks that we saw in the south-west this year. At the end of the day, fishermen cannot tell what is swimming into their net. They capture bass. If they cannot land the fish, they get discarded on the sea bed, dead, and that does not help anybody, particularly with the conservation of fish stocks. The system must also be able to accommodate mixed-species capture in a mixed fishery, such as we have in the south-west, to allow utilisation on board boats of all stocks that are kept and to meet our obligations under article 62 of the United Nations convention on the law of the sea. We should utilise the maximum amount of scientifically approved stocks for the benefit of the United Kingdom fleet.

We joined the European Union at a time when I was connected to the industry, and I look to the Minister to provide me with that assurance, as well as the assurance that on 29 March 2019 we shall leave the common fisheries policy. I fully accept the possibility that we will have to allow an implementation period. We owe that not only to British fishermen but to our European partners.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the London agreement provisions must be included as well, and they must not hang over?

Mrs Murray: As I understand it, we are leaving the London convention of 1964 as well.

Will the Minister confirm today that, even with an implementation period, we shall leave the common fisheries policy on 29 March 2019, and that access to resources will not be sacrificed to buy access to the market?

3.21 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), on securing the debate.

Like many other Members taking part in this afternoon’s debate, I represent a coastal constituency—31 miles of magnificent North sea coastline from St Cyrus to Portlethen. However, I am unlike most of those Members, in that I do not represent much of a fishing industry—certainly not as much as my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) or the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) represent. But the fishing industry is important to me, and should be to all Members, not just because of its impact on the communities that immediately rely on its success, but because fishermen are the best of British. The audacity, ingenuity and energy shown by individuals in the industry in the face of overwhelming odds, regulation, legislation, bans, plans and forced decommissioning should be commended. It is through their sheer determination and innovation, not the words of politicians and civil servants, that record landings are being made at Peterhead. Amazingly, last year North sea cod was recertified as sustainable. That is why we cannot let fishermen down now, and why before my election I signed a pledge committing me to do what I can to ensure that the UK is taken out of the common fisheries policy at the earliest available opportunity. That means 11 pm on 29 March 2019.

I voted remain in the referendum in 2016, but I have no reservations in saying that exiting the European Union can only be a good thing for our fishing industry. It will allow us to forge a new fisheries policy, freed from Brussels diktats and overseas interests, and away from that most harmful of European directives, on equal access to a common resource—a phrase invented only on Britain’s entry to the European Community. We will be able to drive and implement policies that work for our fishermen and our fishing industry.

To those—and they are out there—who think that fishermen do not care about the environment or sustainability and that somehow an independent UK will abandon our commitment to sustainable stocks and good management, I say that is nonsense. No other industry is as invested in protecting its future, the sustainability of its stock, and its environment as the
British fishing industry. As one fisherman said to me not long ago, of course fishermen want sustainable fisheries: no fish, no industry—it is simple.

The Brexit vote has led to great optimism in the Scottish fishing industry, and not without good reason. Brexit offers a host of opportunities for reviving our fisheries and our coastal communities in general. It now falls to us to deliver it for them.

3.23 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): When I think of the time I spent in Brussels, sitting in sweaty rooms negotiating the reform of the common fisheries policy, I sometimes think, “Was that time all wasted?” I suggest that it was not, because the principles that we secured in the reforms are absolutely valid for the measures we need in future, to manage our fisheries after we leave the EU. The core theme that runs through the 25-year environment plan is the desire to leave the natural environment in a better state than the one in which we found it.

The marine environment is every bit as important as the terrestrial one, and key elements of the common fisheries reforms are consistent with that approach. A legal requirement to fish according to maximum sustainable yield, an end to discarding and to the top-down management of fisheries, and putting management of fisheries on a more local basis are key themes that should continue. The key principles should also be grounded in an ecosystems approach. Fish shoal in one area of sea, spawn in another and chase seasonally-dependent nutrition in another. Many of those areas cross national boundaries, so co-operation across those boundaries is vital. I want to hear what the Minister says about the Government’s thinking about that.

There is a cumulative effect from human activities. Overfishing, acidification, increased water temperature, cables and windfarms all have an impact on the management of our waters. There can be opportunities that come from that, and, in relation to marine planning as well as fisheries, I want a holistic view to be taken of the management of our seas. The fishing industry is a key part of that.

I join with every other Member of the House who has dissed the common fisheries policy, given the problems that it brought on our seas and coastal communities; but even if we had never gone into it, we would still face problems, because man’s ability to harvest from the oceans through increased technology has grown exponentially. We should still have faced the same problems of under-abundance that we face, to an extent, now—added to which the CFP made things much worse.

It is very important to consider how a legal requirement to fish sustainably, imposed under a pan-national organisation, is to be replaced by us as an independent state outside that organisation. The Secretary of State has spoken about the new body that will administer the environment, and what he said about that and about the process is also important. The Government will lay a national policy statement before Parliament, and that may require a separate marine policy statement. I hope that that, too, will be fundamentally linked to science and evidence, and that we shall produce a coherent, holistic system of management of our seas.

3.26 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The phrase I now hear most commonly, by a big majority, from UK voters on the issue of Brexit is: “Get on with it.” They are amazed at how long it is taking. I take some comfort when Ministers assure us that the two years and nine months that will elapse between our decision and our departure will be sufficient to prepare everything needed for a smooth transition in the event that there is no agreement. I know that the Government want an agreement, and I wish them well with their negotiations, but it is important for us to learn that everything will be ready. I am sure that the Minister, an enthusiastic supporter of a UK fishing industry, is up there with the best in making sure that things are ready. I should like him to confirm that, because the Government assure us that everything will work on 30 March 2019, that will certainly be true of an independent fishery, if the general negotiations go badly.

Like many others who represent fishing communities, I urge the Minister not to allow the fishing industry to be sucked into any agreement over so-called long transition or implementation. Two years and nine months is quite long enough to work out what we are going to do, and to put in place the things that are needed. Will the Minister promise us, in the next year and a month remaining before our exit from the common fisheries policy, an early White Paper? It is time now, after extensive consultation and study, for us to have a statement of Government intent, to which fishing communities can respond promptly, so that we have a firm and settled policy that will indeed be kinder to our fishermen, fishing grounds, economic interests and fish stocks, as many have described.

Will the Minister promise that we shall then go on to legislate this year, so that any legal powers necessary for the new framework will be up and running in good time, by the time we leave on 30 March 2019? Does he agree with me, and with the sense I get from the debate, that the fishing industry is perhaps the worst damaged of all the many industries that have been damaged by various EU policies—although time does not allow us to talk about that—and that therefore it is even more urgent for fishing to be extracted from EU controls and direction, so that we can again give priority to local and UK interests, and to conservation interests? That is my challenge to the Minister: White Paper, legislation, independence, victory, better industry, conservation of fish stocks. A simple task—I know he is up to it.

3.29 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your charismatic chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate and on his assiduous attention to fisheries. He is looking to 31 March 2019 and for no transition period at all, and said interesting things about effort control, the time-at-sea versus a quota-based approach, and a hybrid of the two. I am quite friendly with a Faroese fisherman, Hogni Hoydal—he has had his own efforts and struggles with his fisheries community. I will investigate further what the hon. Gentleman suggests. If I have understood correctly, he wants nothing to do with the common fisheries policy if we have a transition deal.
Net soak time is an interesting issue of which the Minister and hon. Members, should be aware. The hon. Gentleman talked about Britain’s fish—the UK’s fish—but when it comes to Brexit, we know that 111 powers will be going to Scotland, including on fisheries. I therefore take his use of “Britain” to mean “England”, but I will not overly chastise him because that happens from time to time. I note, however, the interesting idea—I am quite sympathetic to it—regarding all quotas, or fish, landed in the UK. When the Scottish fisheries Minister tried to implement such a measure, he came up against a bit of push-back, but it is worthy of consideration. If people are playing a patriotic game with fish catching, they can also play it with fish landing, and that would be well worth while.

The hon. Gentleman did not mention shellfish. I represent the Outer Hebrides, which has a consistent, long, 200-mile coastline and coastal waters, and 150 miles of land. It is probably the constituency with the largest sea area, and one of the largest in the Westminster Parliament, although sadly it is the smallest by number of constituents. We sell a lot of shellfish to the French and Spanish, and some even goes to China. Unfortunately, the good people of England cannot afford it, but if they are prepared to pay more, we are prepared to sell them shellfish from the Hebrides. It is the tastiest stuff to be found. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said that the Norwegians were in the single market to avoid non-tariff barriers. Fisheries in the Hebrides are very worried about not being in the single market—non-tariff barriers are particularly important to them.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) made an excellent speech—according to our charismatic Chair he was top of the class. I had him down as “thoughtful”, but I also noted “top of the class”, which indeed he was. His speech contained so many bits and pieces of information that I will have to go back and look at Hansard—perhaps with you, Mr Paisley—so that we pick up the nuggets in that veritable goldmine. His points about entitlements to a local fishery were important, as was the possible reorganisation of fisheries. We must remember that established fishing interests might not be that keen on such things, but the hon. Gentleman was very exercised about supporting communities that feel they have lost out over a number of years.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was surprised to be called so early in the debate—I cannot imagine how or why that happened, other than due to his natural skill and assiduousness in debates. Last night, it was remarked that he was probably the only Member who is expected to turn up to Adjournment debates other than the Minister, their private secretary, and the person who secured the debate, and he deserves to be called for that alone. He said that boats have been lost to European bureaucracy, but we must remember that the UK Government signed up in the 1990s to scrap boats. We must also recognise the issue of technology—that point was touched on by the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). Iceland has lost a lot of boats, and fishing communities there mean a lot about what they have lost because of the march of technology. At one time, 25% of Iceland’s population worked in fisheries; now it is 4%. Icelanders hope to have even less of their population working in fisheries, such as the march of technology. Their boats have saunas on them nowadays—that stuff is unimaginable to fishermen in the Outer Hebrides.

The hon. Member for Strangford also mentioned crew from the Philippines, who play a vital role. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) said that fishermen were the best of British, or the best of everything going—I used to be a fisherman myself, although I was not as good as half the lads I stood alongside—but 27.4% of our crews are from outside the UK, and a good number of them, as the hon. Member for Strangford knows, are from places such as the Philippines and Ghana. We need more of them.

Mr Carmichael: Has the hon. Gentleman found, as I have recently, that notwithstanding the insistence that those crews work in the UK only on the basis of a transit visa, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs now insist that they pay income tax here?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: HMRC and the Government have taken a number of steps to lose tax over a number of years, so it is interesting that they might be trying to have the best of both worlds, or have their cake and eat it, while leaving some of our boats unfortunately without fishermen.

I am mindful of time—I agreed to give up some of my time so that more Members could speak, because I think a plurality of voice is important. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) mentioned 29 March 2019, as did a number of other Members. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) expressed the frustration that we all feel with the centralised, bureaucratic and unresponsive CFP. The point about data collection every two years was important.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) mentioned the Danes. I was reminded of how the Secretary of State had one message for our fishermen when he was in Peterhead, but when he was in Copenhagen a few weeks later, quite a different message for our fishermen turned up on Twitter, together with a nice message for the fishermen of Jutland. Perhaps we can get that sorted out one way or the other.

Coal and fish were mentioned by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), as was Aneurin Bevan. I am tempted to ask who sold out the fisheries minister and closed down the pits, but I wouldn’t do that. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) made important points about the improvement in fish stocks. Nineteen key stocks are now about 70% fished to sustainability, up from 60% in 2015. There has been some improvement.

I have debated with the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) in this Chamber many a time. In fact, many years ago, she tragically lost her late husband and is forever held in respect in fisheries debates—we all listen closely to whatever she has to say.

The right hon. Member for Newbury was right in what he said about the tragedy of the commons. That can affect fisheries, and we must remember that under the previous fisheries policy, herrings were sold by the sack from overfishing. We must look to ourselves, because we are as guilty as anybody if given the opportunity to go over the quota on fishing.
I would like to touch on a number of points, but will not because I promised to allow others to speak. However, I wish to stress the importance of migrant workers. We talk about getting migrant workers in for agriculture, but we need them for fisheries as well. People come from the Philippines and Ghana—I know some of them personally—and they live on the island I am from. They are fantastic men and we need more of them. They are great and they add to the community. We want them and there is no reason for not having them. It is usually the Minister responsible for immigration in London who stops them coming—everybody else wants them. I asked the Secretary of State what will happen to EU boats when he takes the quota from them, whether there will be a difference between a historic quota and a boat quota, and how and when that will happen. He dodged the question and said that the catch was going on “to the plates of people from the Western Isles to the south-west of England.”—[Official Report, 25 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 396.]

I said, “Good dodge”, and he said, “Thank you” in the Chamber, but today I am looking for more of a straight answer from the Minister.

Finally, the antipathy that I and many others feel towards the CFP is not really mirrored in Ireland, and I wonder whether they had better negotiators back in the ’70s and the ’90s than we had in Scotland going through London. Certainly, Ireland would not move discussions from Dublin to London, which is why we should start in Edinburgh this time round.

3.38 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), and I thank you, Mr Paisley, for chairing this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate. He opened proceedings with an incredibly balanced and insightful speech, and has a passion for fishing. I think I speak for everybody when I say that we are all keen to see. It will not have escaped the Minister, however, that much of this Government’s rhetoric on fishing has been far from harmonised with that of the EU27. Has the Minister seen, and had chance to reflect on, the draft statement produced by the European Parliament’s Committee on Fisheries—the PECH Committee—which will form the European Parliament’s resolution next month that will facilitate phase 2 of the Brexit negotiations? The statement makes it crystal clear that the EU27 will seek to ensure mutual access to waters and resources in accordance with the relative stability principle. It stresses that reciprocal market access for fishery products has to be negotiated as part of a free trade agreement or an association agreement, and that the level of access to the EU domestic market has to be conditional on the level of access for EU vessels to UK fishing grounds, linking both matters in the agreements.

That position could not be any more at odds with this Government or the Secretary of State. Faced with that, will the Minister outline for hon. Members the Government or the Secretary of State. Faced with that, will the Minister outline for hon. Members what the Labour party’s position is? Has she just read Mrs Sheryll Murray: Could the hon. Lady clarify what the Labour party’s position is? Has she just read out the Labour party’s position? Is it what the PECH Committee has said?

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Could the hon. Lady clarify what the Labour party’s position is? Has she just read out the Labour party’s position? Is it what the PECH Committee has said?

Holly Lynch: No, I want to be clear that the policy statement has come from the PECH Committee of the European Parliament. We will all have our concerns. We are going through that consultation and will outline it in more detail in the coming weeks, but I am clear that we are about to embark on phase 2. That is the position of the EU27, and I am keen to get the Minister’s perspective on it.
With that in mind, I appreciate that the Government have been walking a tightrope for months. Despite his tough taking-back-control narrative, the Secretary of State apparently told the Danish market back in August of last year that “boats from EU countries will still be able to operate in UK waters after Brexit, as the UK does not have enough capacity to catch and process all its fish alone.”

During the annual fisheries debate in December, I asked the Minister for the evidence base for that assertion, which has been contested by the representative fishing organisations that I have met—they have been mentioned in the debate. Can he add any more meat to the bones of that suggestion?

As an MP for a thriving fishing community, the Minister will be aware that access to European markets is incredibly important for our fishing industry. Although the level of dependence on the European market varies by sector, up to 85% of our crab, lobster and prawns are sold into Europe. We will need the freest possible trade and ensure that those routes to market are prioritised and protected.

Last year, the Financial Times reported on the Coast Seafood company on Norway’s west coast, which is obliged to pay 2% tariffs on exports of raw salmon, trout and herring to the EU. If it wants to sell processed products such as smoked salmon or salted fish, those are classed as value-added and, in the case of smoked salmon, face a tax of 13%. That is because Norway is outside both the EU and the customs union. The firm’s owner told the paper that the tariffs hold back the Norwegian industry. It is for that reason that Labour is committed to a customs union with the EU. We want to prioritise trade and ensure that these routes to market for our seafood products remain open. A situation where fish processing becomes uncompetitive would be a massive problem for constituencies such as Grimsby.

Joanna Cherry: The Brexit Committee was told by Norwegian witnesses that, because Norway is not in the customs union, there are high tariffs on processed fish and they send their fish to Poland and Germany to be processed. Does the hon. Lady agree that, if the United Kingdom leaves the customs union, many fish processing jobs will be lost in Scotland and beyond?

Holly Lynch: That is the fear. There will be constituencies around the UK, such as Grimsby, where many jobs are involved in the fish processing sector. We seek clarity on that from the Government as we go into the negotiations.

John Redwood: Is the hon. Lady also saying that it is Labour policy that we should be prepared to bargain away fish stocks in order to get that customs agreement?

Holly Lynch: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the opening speech, where we had a nuanced approach. That will be in the discussions. Access to markets will be important for our fish, but having control of our waters is incredibly important. The Government will have to strike that balance as they go into the negotiations, which is what we are reflecting on today.

In contrast, the Conservative Government have moved from saying that they want trade with the EU after Brexit to be tariff-free to saying that they want trade to be as tariff-free as possible. It is starting to feel as though we are moving only backwards against the Government’s, if not the leave campaign’s, initial bold assertions for a post-Brexit fisheries policy.

It is reassuring that there is firm common ground between the fishing industry, conservationists, recreational fishers and consumers alike that a sustainable approach to a new fishing policy is the only game in town. That was the theme running through a fisheries discussion of experts that I chaired on behalf of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology just last week. For a sustainable approach to work, however, we need two things if we are to have confidence in managing fish stocks responsibly. We need a means of robustly enforcing our approach, and we need to get the science right. Those two things have been mentioned in the debate today, and I am sure they will be considerations for the Minister in the coming weeks and months.

There is renewed public awareness of the need for action to preserve our marine environments—a point made passionately by the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). I am hopeful that consumer movements will play an important role in reducing the plastic waste in our waters. The success of the Marine Stewardship Council certifications shows how environmentally aware consumers can bring about positive change. However, we will need Government action to prevent plastics and protect marine environments.

Labour are proud of our record in government and of introducing the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. We included bold commitments in our manifesto ahead of last year’s general election. We support the blue belt proposals for our overseas territories, and our recently released animal welfare plan announced a consultation on the creation of national marine parks. I hope that those matters will not be overlooked as the negotiations on the future of the UK’s fisheries policy move forward.

Marine protection and fisheries management, as we have already heard, are two sides of the same coin. If we get it right and set the standard both domestically and in our waters around the world, we can secure a flourishing marine environment and a strong and profitable fisheries sector. However, on many of the biggest questions faced by the fisheries sector, hopes are high, but we are still in the dark on much of the detail. There are plenty of opportunities for our fishermen and women and our coastal communities as we leave the EU, but what we desperately need from this Government is the road map, outlining just how we deliver against those opportunities.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Given that the mover of the motion had such a good innings, I do not intend to call him to make a wind-up. I call the Minister, George Eustice.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Thank you, Mr Paisley. May I begin my thanking my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) and congratulating him on securing this debate? I know that this is very important to him, as a fellow Cornish MP. All of us, including my hon. Friends the Members for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) and for St Ives (Derek Thomas), are very aware of the importance of the industry to our area.

3.48 pm
We have had many contributions from Members from a whole range of coastal communities, including my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who has probably got more fisheries in his constituency than the rest of us put together. It is a huge industry in his constituency. We have also had very thoughtful contributions from many Members, including my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who made some important points. The last reform of the CFP, which he was instrumental in, established some important principles. As we leave the European Union and the CFP, it is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that the principles behind policies such as fishing sustainably, using MSY as a key target and making a legal commitment to do so, the discard ban and the landing obligation were right.

Several hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), asked for an update on the situation. He will have noticed that we published our agricultural Command Paper today, and when it comes to fisheries, he does not have much longer to wait. That paper is well advanced: various drafts are being worked on and hon. Members can expect it to be published later in spring. My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Queen’s Speech set out a clear commitment for a fisheries Bill in this Session. The intention is for it to be introduced later this year, possibly—probably—before the summer recess. That is the timescale we are working to.

My right hon. Friend asked whether we would be ready in the event that we come out of the European Union at the end of March 2019 without any agreement, including without an implementation period. The answer is yes. On all fronts, Government are working on contingency plans to ensure that we are ready. In the case of fisheries, that predominantly means ensuring that we plan to have adequate capacity for processing catch certificates, for example, which will be important for our export trade, and adequate enforcement capacity to police our exclusive economic zone.

As we leave the European Union, the international legal position is straightforward and beyond doubt. Under the UN convention on the law of the sea, the UK becomes an independent coastal state, just like the Faroe Islands, Norway and Iceland. That means that we take control of our exclusive economic zone of 200 nautical miles or the median line, in which we have responsibility for managing access and managing that resource. UNCLOS also requires us to co-operate with our neighbours on shared resources and shared stocks, which we intend to do anyway.

Several hon. Members mentioned the 1964 London fisheries convention. Last July, under the terms of that convention, we gave two years’ notice of our intention to quit. That historic agreement gave us some access to some member states in our six to 12-mile zone, so it seemed important to withdraw from it at the same time as we review access arrangements.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) pointed out, there is a huge imbalance in the apportionment of fishing opportunities. In each year between 2012 and 2016, the EU fleet took 760,000 tonnes of fish on average from UK waters. In that same period, the average annual take by the UK fleet from EU waters was 90,000 tonnes. We have been clear that, as we regain control of access and the management of our resources, our intention is to rebalance that arrangement.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) pointed out that the European Union’s Committee on Fisheries—PECH—would like things to stay the same, but it would say that. Why would it not, when the deal is so imbalanced? However, at the end of the day, it does not really matter what the European Union asks for, but what we are prepared to grant it. That is the approach that we will take. We will work in an honourable and sensible way with our European partners, while recognising that we will have control of our exclusive economic zone.

Huw Merriman: On that basis, does the Minister agree that we can have our fishcake and eat it?

George Eustice: That is a very good way of putting it.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall talked about some of Fishing for Leave’s proposals. I have met Fishing for Leave on several occasions. Our officials in the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science and in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have also met with it about its proposals.

At the heart of it, one of the things I have learned as a fisheries Minister is that nothing ever quite works—there are pros and cons to everything, because the marine environment is incredibly complex. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) pointed out, quota regimes tend to work well where there are single-species fisheries, particularly for pelagic fish such as mackerel. It would be inconceivable to move away from a quota regime if we were targeting those pelagic fish. An effort regime can work better where there is a highly mixed fishery with different species and where there is an inshore fleet with a limited quota, but it is quite bureaucratic to send small inshore fishermen out with a quota of 20 kilos of cod for an entire month and expect them to manage with that. We are looking at some of those ideas.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: With regard to mixed fisheries, if we did have an effort regime, would it have the flexibility to compensate fishermen by allowing them to land the bass catches, for example, that they find in their nets?

George Eustice: If I have time, I will return to the bass. In principle, it probably does not make a lot of difference, because it would depend on the bycatch provisions.

There are pros and cons to those systems, and we are looking closely at them, as well as at the hybrid model that my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall outlined. It is something that we would want to introduce carefully—my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury, pointed out that his Ramsgate trial was not altogether successful.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall raised the issue of trade, but I regard that as a separate negotiation: there is a discussion on fisheries management and a separate discussion on trade.
Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): There is a tension between having devolved matters in fishing and agriculture and a UK approach to trade. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be some reconciliation of that tension? How does he propose to deal with that?

George Eustice: Fisheries negotiations are international, so they are a UK competence, but we always take members of the devolved Administrations with us as part of our delegation. Trade and fisheries are both UK competences, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall that they should be kept separate.

We have a huge trade deficit in food with the European Union. A sensible basis for the discussion is that we will buy its food, if it buys ours. However, the difference in fish is not as big as some envisage, although we have a trade surplus. We export just over £1 billion of fish to the EU, but we import just short of £1 billion.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall mentioned the issue of spider crabs and promoting other fish species. A levy body called Seafish is responsible for that.

Several hon. Members rose—

George Eustice: I will try to make a little headway, otherwise we will not get to anybody else.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall also mentioned pulse trawling. I have previously made clear that we have concerns about that and I have asked CEFAS to look at it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous)—whose constituency is the home of CEFAS, the world’s leading centre for science in fisheries—raised the issue of the small inshore fleet, for which he has been a consistent campaigner. Through the discard quota uplift, we have already sought to give the inshore fleet a significant quota increase, but leaving the EU is another opportunity to look at some of those management operations.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) mentioned the complex issue of skates and rays. There are over 20 different species of skates and rays, some of which are prohibited, and it is very difficult to get their management right. Our long-term objective is to break the composite total allowable catch down into individual species.

On the issue of bass, which my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall and for North Cornwall raised, there should have been a larger bycatch provision for trawlers, as there was last year. We did not agree with the Commission’s approach, but we were unable to win the argument this time.

We have had a good debate. It was clearly not long enough, because nearly every hon. Member had their contribution cut short. I reassure hon. Members that we will have plenty of time to discuss the issue in future.

I have time to mention the issue of trade from countries such as Norway. Several hon. Members pointed to the small tariffs on those countries, but they ignored the autonomous tariff-rate quota allowances, which are tariff-free quotas that we could create and that the EU creates. On species such as cod, Norway does not pay tariffs and we import large quantities of fish from Iceland that is tariff free under the preferential trade or ATQ—autonomous tariff quota—system. There are many devices that we can use in international trade to deal with those issues.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and no doubt we will have many more such debates in the months ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered future UK fisheries policy.
Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair

4 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to an important debate about National Democracy Week, for which there is probably no one more qualified to move the motion than Mr Chris Skidmore.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered National Democracy Week.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to highlight the importance of the week beginning 2 July 2018, which the Government announced last year as the inaugural National Democracy Week. I should declare my interest: I was the Cabinet Office Minister who made that announcement on 15 September 2017, committing the Government to establishing the week. I hope the Minister does not feel that I am appearing as a ministerial Banquo’s ghost; it is not my intention to haunt my old Department, but to highlight the week’s potential, not only for the Minister and the Cabinet Office—the Department responsible for democratic engagement—but for promoting democratic engagement and the concept of democratic inclusion, as defined in the Government’s recent democratic engagement plan.

We chose the week beginning 2 July as National Democracy Week because it will mark the 90th anniversary of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928, which gave women a truly equal right to vote. As the Minister will be aware, although we recently celebrated the 100th anniversary of the right for women to vote being won by the suffrage movement, that right applied only to women over the age of 30; it was another 10 years before Stanley Baldwin’s Conservative Government passed the legislation that placed men and women on an equal footing in the eyes of our democracy.

As part of this year’s suffrage centenary celebrations, National Democracy Week has the opportunity not only to highlight the importance of the 1928 Act and its place in history but to look ahead. That is vital, because it will allow us to ask ourselves whether we believe the franchise is truly equal or whether there is more we can do to ensure that every voice matters in our democracy and that we are content that our democracy is truly working for everyone in society.

I am delighted that 100 years and a day after the Representation of the People Act 1918, the Minister introduced legislation to ensure that the process of anonymous registration would be made much easier for survivors of domestic violence. It demonstrates that, as a matter of social justice, we elected representatives must always listen closely to voices who state that they are still struggling to exercise their democratic right to vote. One campaigner, Mehala Osborne, a survivor of domestic violence, found that she was unable to vote in the mayoral elections in Bristol, so with Women’s Aid on board, she began a campaign for a more democratic society. She demonstrated that despite the fact that we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of women getting the right to vote, there are still women in society who are unable to vote because they may be put at risk if they join the electoral register publicly. I am delighted that the Minister has taken action to change that situation so that survivors of domestic violence can much more easily register anonymously to vote in this year’s local elections.

It is clear that in this year of celebration of suffrage and democracy, there are still people in this country who, through no fault of their own, cannot vote—not citizens who refuse to engage in the democratic process, tragic as that is, but active citizens whose voice continues to go unheard because they are unable to participate in elections. Although legislation can give the appearance of equal rights and participation, the reality is that modern Governments always have to look again at the barriers that prevent certain groups in society from exercising their democratic right to vote.

For people who have learning disabilities or physical disabilities, I know that the Government are committed to working to ensure that every stage of the democratic process is as smooth and clear as possible, with their review of the accessibility of elections. For people whose voice may be silenced by electoral fraud, I know that the Government’s plans to increase electoral integrity will be of real value, preventing impersonation at polling stations, tightening the anonymous registration process and reducing the threat of intimidation—not only for voters at polling stations, but for candidates standing for election.

Those are important reforms for today that will help to strengthen our democratic process and give people the right to vote, but we should also think of tomorrow. We may not know what tomorrow will bring, but I believe that this year and in future years, National Democracy Week should help to provide a vital forum to discuss what more we need to do collectively to strengthen our democracy and meet future challenges. Some of those challenges we know about and some are still unknowable, but we will have a week to consider them.

Civil society organisations have already organised events such as National Voter Registration Week. Such events have been highly successful in years of electoral activity, but less so in what I call the years of peace-time. I hope that the establishment of National Democracy Week will allow all civil society groups and political parties, regardless of colour, to rally around the first week of every July so that it becomes a permanent fixture in the political and democratic calendar of the United Kingdom. The July date will also allow it to mark the beginning of the annual canvass. I recognise that the canvass is well overdue for reform, which will undoubtedly happen, but I hope that local authorities across the country will recognise the value of the week and take the opportunity to highlight their own electoral registration processes to ensure that every eligible member can join that year’s electoral register.

My ambition when establishing National Democracy Week was not only for at least one event to take place in every local authority across the country, starting at a low level and building up in future years, but for as many Members of Parliament and elected local councillors as possible to get involved and speak in schools—perhaps on the Friday, when hon. Members are back in their constituencies. That will allow us to demonstrate on social media and elsewhere the value of the week as a mass participation and engagement exercise similar to Small Business Saturday.
Much work is going on behind the scenes in preparation for this year’s National Democracy Week: chapter 13 of the Government’s democratic engagement plan sets out the next steps for the week, and the National Democracy Week council comprises key civil society groups involved in our democratic society. I would value an update from the Minister on the progress of preparations, but also on when she thinks the Cabinet Office will go public with the launch of a communications strategy for the week, possibly including a Twitter handle, a website, packs for parliamentarians and other materials for organisations that will lead engagement locally.

I draw the Minister’s attention to the strong interest shown by the United Nations in the Government’s proposals, and indeed in our democratic engagement strategy. I believe that as one of the oldest democracies in the world, the UK has a duty to encourage and inspire developing democracies to look at participation in and access to their own elections. National Democracy Week provides a real opportunity for international engagement as well as local involvement.

I know that the Minister, who was previously chair of the all-party group on democratic participation, shares my commitment that participation in our democracy, electoral registration and electoral access is more than just a technical or legal matter. It sends out a message that behind every vote is a voice that deserves to be heard, and I hope that National Democracy Week will focus on what we can do and need to do for our democratic future, just as we commemorate our democratic past.

I hope that this year’s National Democracy Week will be the first of many, but its success depends on getting as many people involved in as many regions and local authorities as possible. My message to anyone who cares about democratic participation is to get involved, get involved now and contact the Cabinet Office. This is too important an issue for party politics and I hope that in 10 years’ time, when we will celebrate in 2028 the 100th anniversary of that true equal franchise, National Democracy Week will still be going from strength to strength as a cornerstone of our democratic calendar.

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): May I say, Mr Hollobone, what a pleasure it is to have you join us today and chair this debate?

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) on securing this debate. On digital registration, however, there is a problem with people registering to vote for general elections in multiple locations, as opposed to asserting their right to vote at a local election in a number of locations. What steps are the Minister and her Department considering taking to tackle that?

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend makes a helpful point in reminding us that, even as we celebrate the flourishing nature of our democracy, we must also ensure that it has integrity and security. He highlights an issue that I know has been in the minds of many people, not only since last year’s general election but as a general point about the process of making it easier to register to vote. Some people ask, “Well, is it easier not only to register to vote but to use one’s vote in an unlawful way?” which is what he is driving at. It is not unlawful to register to vote in local elections in multiple places, but it is unlawful to vote twice in the same election. As the Minister with responsibility for electoral registration, I am looking for evidence of any such unlawfulness—my door is always open to any hon. Member who believes they have such evidence. If I received such, I would discuss it with the Electoral Commission and the relevant parts of our police authorities.

It is extremely important that we are vigilant about electoral fraud wherever we find it. In fact, to pick up on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for...
Kingswood, electoral fraud is not a victimless crime—it is a crime against a person whose right to speak has been robbed from them. That is very important to note in this context and this year, when we are looking to celebrate our democracy. In the context of the record highs that we are seeing in our democracy at the moment, it is important to be reassured. There are very high levels of completeness and accuracy in the electoral registers, which should give us confidence that we continue to live in a very secure democracy. We all want to keep it that way.

I am working this year with a range of organisations to build on the momentum of getting more people registered to vote. The first example of that work was noted by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood: improving how people register anonymously. Working with Women’s Aid, the Electoral Commission and electoral administrators, we have developed reforms to improve access to that scheme for survivors of domestic abuse. Today marks the next phase in the parliamentary passage of the regulations dealing with that work. They will be debated first in the House of Lords and, alongside other registration changes including anti-fraud measures, taken through Parliament, but implementing them is our core aim.

I am considering measures to improve student electoral registration. That will be done not only by listening to parliamentarians and engaging again with the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators, but by requiring for the first time that higher education providers co-operate with electoral registration officers to facilitate electoral registration among their student population.

As a final example of that work, we can improve access for those with disabilities. A call for evidence has been launched by the Government, which I am delighted to say has returned many very helpful points. I want to understand and act on them.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I apologise for my late arrival for this debate—I was participating in the business in the main Chamber.

The Minister makes a very valuable point about vulnerable people, especially those who will be addressed in National Democracy Week and those who can now vote anonymously if they are survivors of domestic abuse. I led a debate in Westminster Hall on the Disability Confident scheme to engage more disabled people in the workforce. I hope she can continue that work in relation to democratic participation, and ensure that disabled people are as active in our democratic process as they are in our workforce.

Chloe Smith: I am absolutely delighted to find a fellow passionate advocate in my hon. Friend, and I thank him for reminding us that there is a place for everybody in our democracy, just as there is in our economy and society. That is what we are engaged in. There is more to do on exactly that. The Government’s democratic engagement plan made the commitment to launch the first ever National Democracy Week to encourage greater understanding and recognition of the UK’s electoral system and of how it gives all our citizens the voice they deserve.

The week will be held between 2 and 8 July this year, coinciding with both the year-long suffrage centenary celebrations and, on 2 July, the 90th anniversary of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928, which gave equal voting rights to men and women. National Democracy Week will be a moment for engaging people from under-registered groups by uniting stakeholders in a shared ambition and in the message that, regardless of who we are or where we have come from, we must together ensure that every person in our society who is entitled to do so has a voice and an equal chance to participate in our democracy. Organisations with an interest in democratic participation will be brought together for a week of unified national action.

The week is supported by a National Democracy Week Council, which has been established as a way for organisations to support and develop the week’s activities. Its members will be incredibly helpful in delivering the activities and in encouraging others to take part, and I put on record my thanks to them. The council is composed of senior figures from across the electoral community and the civil society sector, and will help us to put potential electors at the heart of the democratic process and ensure that we reach as far and wide as possible. The council’s role involves advising on the events and activities, taking an active role in communicating them across the United Kingdom and in mobilising organisations, and measuring success and reporting back on the week.

The work in hand that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood asked me to report on includes developing the creative elements of the campaign, such as the brand identity and the communications materials which I will bring to the House as soon as I can. There will be a campaign website, and an awards ceremony to recognise outstanding achievement and innovation in democratic engagement, for which nominations will open in March 2018. There will be a great amount to do to include parliamentarians in the work and myriad ways to ensure that we reach out to under-registered groups, including young people, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities.

I stress that we are strongly encouraging all parts of the United Kingdom to run events so that people everywhere have a chance to take part. I am delighted to see in this very Chamber representation from across the United Kingdom, which is very important. A programme of events will be published on a public calendar on the National Democracy Week website from later in March when the website is launched, and nominations for the awards will open in parallel.

I want to put a few points on the record about the link with the suffrage centenary. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced a £5 million fund for projects to commemorate the 2018 milestone and the significance of the suffrage movement. The centenary is momentous in its own right—hon. Members know that there will be a range of activities across Parliament. Although the centenary is distinct from National Democracy Week, the two come together in a shared objective and remind us that the rights were often hard-fought-for and therefore should be celebrated all the more.

The resources for National Democracy Week will help us to ensure that we engage everyone on the task. Civil society organisations, central government, schools, colleges, universities, young people and Members all have their part to play. A series of resources will be tailored for specific audiences. For example, there will
be a free National Democracy Week pack to help plan and publicise activities and the website will provide further support. Hon. Members will be able to download materials as part of the celebrations. There will be a parliamentarian pack to help MPs to connect with, and inspire, young people, and a schools resource pack with a specific focus on the suffrage movement at secondary school level. There will be a programme of democracy ambassadors—young advocates recruited to inspire their peers to champion democratic participation—and a youth digital campaign to support the promotion and recruitment of democracy ambassadors among young people aged between 13 and 16.

I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood for calling this debate on a very important issue.

Chris Skidmore: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive update on the content of National Democracy Week. I am sure that democratic society and civil society groups will welcome the news she has announced. I welcome the fact that we have had Members here from Cornwall, Perthshire, Suffolk, Merseyside and Liverpool—all corners of the United Kingdom—providing representation and demonstrating that there is a truly national interest in National Democracy Week.

Chloe Smith: I again echo that point about the breadth of the work across our whole Union. There is an opportunity for all parts of our United Kingdom to celebrate our democracy and its preciousness, and the opportunities for more people to take their role and have a voice in it.

I welcome further ideas for National Democracy Week from any hon. Member or any Member of the other place. After all, we have the privilege of standing here as part of our democracy—we are proud to do so—but by extension it falls to us to help others to do the same. I welcome thoughts from hon. Members on anything I have said, so that together we can go further and encourage more people to take their place in this country’s democracy.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The school bell has rung and we can start the next important debate early.

A-Level Provision: Knowsley Metropolitan Borough

4.27 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered A-Level provision in Knowsley Metropolitan Borough.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to welcome all my fellow Knowsley metropolitan borough MPs to the debate, plus others from nearby who clearly have an interest in education. I also welcome the Minister, who has a long-standing interest in the matter. Indeed, I think we first had a meeting with him on this very issue sometime in June 2016. The matter is therefore not recent; it has concerned my colleagues and I—and, I hope and believe, the Department—for well over two years.

Knowsley is now the only sizeable English metropolitan authority that does not have A-level provision within its borders. It is a matter of some disgrace that young people living in such a large borough, with such a large urban population, cannot take A-levels within the boundaries of the authority. Those who wish to do so—and many do—have to leave the borough. That is not good, and it should not persist any longer than it has to. Indeed, only two other English authorities that have some responsibility for education have no A-level provision within their borders: the Isle of Wight, which has its own issues as an island, and the City of London, which does not have that many residents.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): In Carmel College, 400 pupils—just under 25%—come from Knowsley. That is exactly the same position as two years ago.

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend has dug out some interesting numbers from Carmel College, a sixth-form college in St Helens. It is some miles away from Knowsley. It is fair to say that it is not the easiest place to get to. It is on the edge of the green belt on the edge of St Helens. If I had to get there without my car, it would not be immediately obvious to me how to do that. For young people from Knowsley or Halewood—the part of Knowsley in my constituency—having to go to that college presents significant extra difficulties, costs and barriers to their ability to take up A-levels.

Halewood Academy sixth form was closed in the summer of 2017. The closure had been mooted from the previous spring. That was when my colleagues and I first sought meetings with Ministers in the Department. The Minister here today first met with us about the issue back in May or June 2016. The sixth form closed, notwithstanding the fact that it left the entire borough without A-level provision within its borders. Any young people who did well in their GCSEs at Halewood Academy were then required to leave the borough to take up A-levels and post-16 education. That is not acceptable for young people anywhere to have to do that, particularly not when those born in Knowsley begin life with greater disadvantages than most pupils who might go on to study A-levels and post-16 education.

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council is second on the list of most deprived local authority areas on the indices of multiple deprivation, with 45% of its
neighbourhoods in the highly deprived category. Despite many efforts by Governments of all persuasions, it has a long-standing history of educational under-attainment. The Government have had initiatives—not enough in my view—that have led to extra support going to Knowsley. Previous Labour Governments of which I was a member also had many initiatives, including building new schools and new educational establishments. None of those things has thus far resulted in educational attainment being sufficiently improved. It has gone up and it has gone down, but it has consistently been below average, and that is still the case.

Knowsley is precisely the kind of place where we need to ensure that educational opportunities are available and present in every community. They need to be easily accessible. We should encourage young people who have the potential—many do—to study post-16. In particular, we should encourage them to do academic A-levels, which provide such an excellent route into better chances in life educationally, such as going on to higher education and university in the traditional way. It also offers job opportunities and economic activity that can lead to prosperity later in life. Knowsley is just the kind of place where A-levels need to be accessed by as many people as possible. It is not the kind of place where that opportunity should be difficult to access.

There have been some improvements over the past year, for which I congratulate schools, but Knowsley’s performance is currently among the worst on some educational attainment measures at GCSE. It is still below average, although things have improved over the past year on the attainment 8 measure, which is the one that is often cited. Good education is a right for all in a civilised society, no matter the circumstances of birth of an individual. We should judge ourselves as a nation and as a society on whether we can ensure that people born in Knowsley—with all the disadvantages that that often carries with it and implies—have just as much chance of meeting their potential in education and life as anyone born with greater advantages living elsewhere.

In addition to that being the right thing to do—in their rhetoric, the Government say they wish to do it—it is the key to the future economic prosperity of the English regions, such as Merseyside and the wider north-west. Our success as a region absolutely depends on us having available a highly educated workforce and developing the full potential of all our children and young people academically and economically. If we do not manage to do so, it is very likely that our area and region will fall further behind some of the other regions in our nation that manage to fully develop the potential of their young people.

Doing A-levels and going through the academic route on to university is one tried and trusted method by which those born with disadvantages in life can meet their potential academically and economically. That improves social mobility in our communities, our region and our society more generally, helping to improve the economy of the nation as a whole. It is for that reason, among others, that I am particularly concerned about what has been happening with post-16 education in Knowsley. I fear that the Government are not doing as well as they wish to and as I hope they wish they would. They are inadvertently letting down my constituents who live in Halewood.

The Government’s approach to these matters fails because it unfortunately has no analysis of the impact of deprivation on educational attainment and no analysis of the disadvantage that results. As a consequence, Government educational policy does not seek in practice—it often does so rhetorically—to counteract disadvantage. It simply assesses numbers and standards and applies money on the basis of numbers and judges on the basis of standards. While that is one way of doing things, it does not do the job in an area such as Knowsley, which has deep-seated and long-standing issues with disadvantage and educational attainment.

As the Minister well knows, my colleagues and I have been raising this issue since March 2016, when I wrote to the then Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). In addition, I have had a number of meetings with Ministers in the past two years, usually attended by my colleagues. There has been a dizzying array of Ministers before us—it has been like a merry-go-round—although I am very pleased that the Minister with us today is still in his post. His memory reaches back to those early meetings, so he knows how seriously local representatives have taken this matter. I know how seriously he takes his responsibilities, and I am glad he is answering the debate today.

I do not think I am misrepresenting the Government if I say that they accepted from an early stage in the meetings that the current situation—having no A-level provision within the borders of an entire metropolitan borough—is unacceptable and unsustainable. At a meeting a year ago with Lord Nash, who was then one of the Minister’s colleagues, we were promised that a new and excellent provider would be brought into Knowsley to restore academic A-level provision and that capital money would be provided to facilitate that if necessary. Since that time, I think the Department has backtracked from that commitment. It has supported reintroducing A-level provision, possibly including some academic A-levels, through the merger of Knowsley Community College and St Helens College at the Stockbridge Lane site in Huyton. I understand that that will happen; such a merger was on the cards anyway.

We have also been told, following an assessment by the Education Funding Agency, that there is no need for any new provision on the basis of its usual criteria. My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and I could have told the Ministers responsible that anyway. Indeed, we did tell them in meetings that the situation does not fit into the Education Funding Agency’s usual criteria for providing extra support and provision, because the issue is not that there has been a sudden boost in population or increase in the number of people wanting to study A-levels in the borough. The issue is that the available provision has simply disappeared, been closed and been taken elsewhere, for various reasons none of which has to do with the situations of the students and potential students themselves.

The situation was therefore never likely to fit the usual criteria that the Education Funding Agency applies, and I do not believe that it was particularly useful to go through that process, although of course the local authority did so, along with officials in the Education Funding Agency. Surprise, surprise, it decided that there was no
Ms Rimmer: The advice is that there has been an impressive number of applications so far, suggesting significant aspiration among school leavers in Knowsley to study A-levels, and an offer of 21 subjects, many of them A-levels. Is my hon. Friend concerned that people may be applying thinking that everything they want to do will definitely be on offer?

Maria Eagle: I think if one looks at a curriculum and is given 21 subjects to choose from, it would not be unusual to expect that, if one chooses a course, it will be run. However, it is not clear to me that they will be. When I asked the chief executive at the college about that, I was told that “the number of subjects that will run will of course depend on demand.”

I was not told what the minimum number of pupils is that will guarantee that one of the A-levels on offer will be run. As far as I can see, there is no guarantee that any of the courses will be run from September of this year. We hope that they all will be, but I can see no guarantee of that in the answers that I have received, nor have I had any indication of what the minimum number of pupils required will be to ensure that a course is run.

When I was at school, which admittedly was a very long time ago now, I was told at my local comprehensive that I could choose any A-level subject and the school would put it on, which is indeed what happened. We are not in that game any more, unfortunately. I do not know how many or how few people have to apply for A-level English language, or A-level politics for that matter, for that course to be run. I also do not know whether that course, if and when it is run, will be run at the Knowsley site in Huyton, because St Helens College has links elsewhere. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston has already referred to the so-called partnership plan with Carmel College, which is a long way outside the Knowsley borough boundaries.

The provision is welcome, and I do not wish to sound churlish, but if it results in no opportunity for local young people over the age of 16 to study academic A-levels and other A-levels within the borough boundaries, we have not moved any further. My difficulty is that it is harder for young people born and brought up in Knowsley, owing to their educational disadvantage, family circumstances and deprivation, to do A-levels than it is for people with a more advantaged family background. Such people may have had a more advantaged upbringing, more of an understanding in their family of the value of academic study, and a more supportive environment at home. It is easier for young people in those circumstances to take on and do A-levels than it is for young people examining their options in Knowsley.

It is doubly difficult if doing A-levels and academic A-levels means an additional cost of getting to college, or the additional barrier of having to get to that campus, five to 20 miles away. That can make the difference between a young person taking on the A-level study or not. When there is disadvantage already, having that additional barrier makes it much less likely that a young person will take up the A-level provision available. I fear that the double disadvantage that faces young people in deprived areas puts more people off studying than would be the case if they could just go to the sixth form in their local school. Those who take that option end up having to leave the borough, and even that has the additional barriers I mentioned of extra cost and time. They may also have to travel in a way that is not easy, perhaps if the family does not have a car or if the bus routes are not very good and do not go frequently to the place where A-levels can be studied.

To the credit of St Helens and the merged college, and Knowsley Community College, they have put on a bus that will take young people from my constituency to the site in Huyton. The Minister knows that we have geographical challenges in Knowsley because of the shape of the borough and the fact that there are three very distinct centres of population, none of which is particularly well served by buses running between them, which presents practical difficulties.

A bus is to be put on, but a young person from Halewood would have to get on that bus at 7.25 in the morning in order to get to the site in Huyton more than an hour later, going around the houses and through most bits of Liverpool on the way—the congested bits. I noticed, looking at the route—and would not get back to the pick-up point in Halewood until 10 to six. As the Minister knows, A-level studies are not eight hours of lessons every day. If someone has to get on a bus at 7.25 and does not get home till 10 to six, with perhaps one or two hours of study on site, that is not a tremendously practical way to convince a young person to think that it is a good option. What else might the Department and the Minister do to deal with that additional barrier—that extra disadvantage of having to wait for a bus, which is free—that young people from my bit of Knowsley and Halewood have in getting to the site in Huyton, if the A-levels are all to be taught there?

How many young people in Huyton will simply decide that there is some option other than A-levels that they will do instead? How many will decide that A-levels are not for them? What is the consequence of that over time? It makes it look like young people and communities such as Halewood are not interested in higher education or in post-16 studies that lead to job and economic opportunities in later life that might help their social mobility. That is not a good thing and will not tackle the ingrained disadvantage I have been talking about.
The relative widening of the gap between the educational opportunities available to those who are better off in areas that are better off, and those who are not, is a great worry for the future of social mobility in our society, and for economic opportunity. Analysis by the Centre for Cities has shown a widening gap in educational opportunities between northern and southern cities. Places with the weakest economies have less access to quality higher education, which compounds existing economic divides and makes them grow.

The Government recognise that trend because they introduced opportunity areas to try to counteract precisely that effect by supporting better educational provision. Inexplicably, they have not awarded that status to Knowsley. Inexplicably, Knowsley metropolitan borough was so far down the list on the criteria that I do not see how it could have been awarded that status. I would suggest to the Minister that there might be something wrong with the criteria. If a borough such as Knowsley does not come out pretty high up on that kind of measure, I do not understand the criteria.

Nothing I am saying should be taken as critical of the local authority, which literally has almost no levers left to pull in respect of secondary schooling in Knowsley. There are no directly controlled local authority maintained secondary schools, only academies or church schools. All of them are part of multi-academy trusts based outside the borough. The only thing that the authority can do is try to persuade and cajole. They have no power or levers to pull. The Minister knows that financial imperatives apply to multi-academy trusts and academies that give them little leeway to do things in the interests of local communities—that might cost money that the academy wishes to use for something else.

I am also not criticising Halewood Academy. Once it was forced into academisation by a bad Ofsted, it had no option but to close its sixth form for financial reasons, no matter what the consequences for the almost 100 pupils who were studying for A-levels at the time. Since that unfortunate event, it has taken welcome strides towards improving its GCSE results, which I welcome very much. Pupils, teachers and governors have worked very hard at that school, and I congratulate them on their work and the progress they have made.

Knowsley borough council is implementing a local deal for improving access to A-levels, along with its partner organisations; trying to improve links between primary and secondary schools; celebrating and highlighting school achievements; and trying to boost mentoring programmes and other useful and worthy initiatives. But let us be honest: they are tinkering at the edges of a major problem in educational opportunities faced by our communities. The council no longer has the power or levers to pull. The Minister knows that financial imperatives apply to multi-academy trusts and academies that give them little leeway to do things in the interests of local communities—that might cost money that the academy wishes to use for something else.

I have a few questions for the Minister, and would ask for a response, if not today, later, if he needs a bit more time to consider them. Will he guarantee that academic A-levels will be taught within the borough boundaries from September this year, as a consequence of the merger between Knowsley Community College and St Helens College? What is the minimum number of people accepted on a course for it to be run, rather than for it to be on the curriculum but not actually taught, and for us to be told that not enough people have applied? Will the Minister guarantee that candidates will not be expected to travel to additional sites to do their courses if they accept places at the Knowsley Community College site, because some of the sites they would have to travel to are a long way away, which would present another difficulty for those pupils?

Perhaps the Minister will enlighten us about what the partnership with Carmel College consists of and its implications. If people will have to travel to that site, that does not put us in a different position to the current one in terms of A-level provision within the borough boundaries.

Will the Minister tell us what extra money the Government are putting in to assist in solving the ongoing problems with A-level provision in Knowsley? I have set out some of the additional challenges and disadvantages. Given that Knowsley did not fit the criteria for opportunity areas, perhaps the Minister will tell us what additional support his Department can give.

What plans does he have to recognise deprivation and educational disadvantage in the how he funds post-16 provision? It worries me that the problem we have in Knowsley now might be something that we see in other areas, such as the south Liverpool part of my constituency.

We are already seeing newly built schools closing because they had a bad Ofsted, and other newly built schools being forced into academisation—it is not clear who the sponsors will be and what will happen to their sixth forms. I fear that, because of how the Department funds post-16 education, where standards tie in with forced academisation, for example, and the financial imperatives on academies, we may, over time, see developing deserts of post-16 opportunity in places that are already blighted by disadvantage. A number of our sixth forms and newly built schools will be forced to close because of the interaction between standards and numbers at post-16, leading to the closure of provision, which can be even more detrimental for areas already disadvantaged in accessing opportunity.

I am not convinced that the Department and the Government’s policy goes far enough to understand, recognise and do something about entrenched disadvantage and the lack of educational attainment. Instead, it looks simply at standards and numbers. An area such as Knowsley will never be advantaged if one looks simply at standards and numbers, because of the existing long-standing disadvantage. That is quite enough from me, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s reply.
Community College—should be the provider. The then Minister and his officials were very negative about the potential for that to happen. It therefore came as something of a surprise, although a pleasant one, when it was announced last year that the new A-level provision based in north Huyton in my constituency would indeed be the merged St Helens and Knowsley Community College. As my hon. Friend said, the intention at the time appeared to be to look for a provider with a strong track record in A-level provision—not necessarily in Knowsley or even Liverpool, but further afield than Knowsley. I do not want to mislead anybody. Like my hon. Friend, I am delighted that from next September there will be A-level provision at the college, but there seems to have been a change that nobody has ever explained to us between the initial meeting in July 2016 and what eventually happened.

I will be brief, because we are short of time. I welcome the fact that there will be 21 A-level subjects on offer, linked up with other qualifications, and that, as my hon. Friend said, there will be a wide range of subjects, including English literature, English language, mathematics and more specialist subjects such as politics, product design and computer science. Offering those subjects is a good step forward, although they will not necessarily be the merged St Helens and Knowsley Community College—should be the provider. The then Minister and his officials were very negative about the potential for that to happen. It therefore came as something of a surprise, although a pleasant one, when it was announced last year that the new A-level provision based in north Huyton in my constituency would indeed be the merged St Helens and Knowsley Community College. As my hon. Friend said, the intention at the time appeared to be to look for a provider with a strong track record in A-level provision—not necessarily in Knowsley or even Liverpool, but further afield than Knowsley. I do not want to mislead anybody. Like my hon. Friend, I am delighted that from next September there will be A-level provision at the college, but there seems to have been a change that nobody has ever explained to us between the initial meeting in July 2016 and what eventually happened.

I welcome the fact that there is a three-year commitment to the proposal because, given what I am about to say about the problems confronting the college, it will take three years. I also welcome the fact that, because of issues relating to Knowsley’s geography which we have talked about all along, there will be free transport arrangements, including from Halewood and Kirkby in my constituency, which will enable students to travel to the centre of the borough. Hopefully, that inducement will enable them to overcome what my hon. Friend described as insurmountable travel problems.

I want to point out something that is not generally known, which is that it is not quite true that there is no A-level provision anywhere else in Knowsley. I visited All Saints Catholic High School in my constituency last Friday, and I met a group of students—10 young women in year 11—called the scholars group. Some of them will stay on at the school to do a combination of A-level and BTEC courses. Admittedly, only the art, graphics and textiles A-level is on offer, in addition to which there are BTEC courses in business, health and social care, science, sport and performing arts. It is a relatively small sixth form, and it offers a narrow range of options.

I was very encouraged to meet those young women, together with the headteacher, and to find out what they felt about the offer that the college is putting forward. Interestingly—this is a challenge for the new arrangements—not one of those 10 young women intends to study A-levels at the newly established A-level academy in north Huyton. They intend to go to Carmel College, which as we have already heard will be part of the arrangements, although we are not clear exactly how, and to Winstanley College in Wigan—that may seem strange, but there is a connection between some schools in Kirkby and Winstanley College, and some young people are prepared to travel that far to get a good course. A couple of them hope to go to a fee-paying school—Merchant Taylors’ in Crosby, which is in Sefton—on a scholarship.

The challenge for the new college—I hope the Minister will think about how the Government might support it in this—is that the young people in year 11 have already made decisions about where they want to go, and they are understandably choosing to go to colleges that have a good track record in A-levels. That is something we need to address if those young people decide in the end to go to the college. There are a lot of advantages to the offer, and I hope that a lot of young people will take it up—we have heard that there is a lot of interest already—but I think it will take three years, which is what the plan is, before it is established on a proper footing.

5.7 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing this debate. She started with the principle that good education is a right for all. That should happen everywhere—not just in areas of advantage, but in areas of disadvantage. She succinctly outlined the issues facing young people in her borough, where 45% of young people grow up in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK. My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) has championed this issue for a number of years. They are MPs looking for a solution for the common good. They are not just critical of Government policy; they want to do the best for their borough. He gave some extraordinarily powerful testimony about the young people studying at All Saints and talked about what their future might look like.

My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood rightly talked about the gap between the north and the south. Evidence from Government reviews shows that, if we draw a line from the Humber estuary to the Mersey estuary, the number of children getting five good GCSEs is about 34%. In London, the previous Labour Government and the London challenge brought the number there right up so that nowadays 50% of children receiving free school meals in London achieve five good GCSEs or more. That gap needs to be challenged. It is not just me and the Labour party saying that. The former chief inspector of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw, said that “the people of Liverpool, Manchester and the north are not being treated fairly—that their children have less of a chance of educational success than people south of the Wash.”

I do not want to talk about my constituency—although there is good provision in my city, it is being centralised to locations many miles away in certain colleges. My hon. Friend said that we are creating deserts of post-16 education in the poorest areas. That is probably the quote for today.

The further education sector educates more than 4 million people a year in England, with students shared between mandatory education and university, including those going back to education in later life. Under the coalition Government, spending on further education in sixth forms fell by 14% in real terms. Core funding is only protected in cash terms up to 2019-20. At the end of the spending review period in 2019-20, the Institute for Fiscal Studies expects that the spending per student in further education will be just above the level 30 years ago, at the end of the 1980s.
Since 2010, the sector has faced sustained budget cuts amounting to 14% in real terms. That has had a number of serious consequences for the provision of further education, from a sharp rise in the number of providers facing a financial crisis to many reducing the number of courses they have to offer or, as in Knowsley, courses going altogether. Between 2010-11 and 2016-17, spending on 16-to-19 education fell by 17.5% in real terms.

On A-levels, as our Front-Bench team under my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) have raised time and time again, the funding that sixth-form colleges, schools and academies now receive to educate sixth formers covers the cost of delivering three A-level or equivalent qualifications and little more. According to the Sixth Form Colleges Association, the average annual funding received by sixth-form colleges and school or academy sixth forms is now only £4,531 per student. That is 21% less than the funding received to educate younger students in secondary schools, 48% less than the average university tuition fee and 70% less than the average sixth-form fee in the independent sector.

In March 2017, plans were announced to increase investment in 16-to-19 education for students studying technical courses in further education colleges. That will have no impact on the vast majority of students in sixth-form colleges, or school or academy sixth forms, as they are primarily studying academic qualifications such as A-levels.

To come back to the Knowsley situation, the essence of what has been raised today involves six secondary schools in the borough, four of which have been academised. The Gove reforms introduced by the former Education Secretary threw the sector up into the air and brought it down so that there is now little chance of local elements changing the dynamic in their boroughs, because we have lost the principle of subsidiarity in education that was enshrined by Ellen Wilkinson, the first Labour Minister of Education in ‘45, when she implemented the Butler Act.

Local leaders can do very little now. Michael Wilshaw has said that he wants to see MPs, such as the MPs present today, leading the charge for higher standards and better education, but there is little that they, local leaders or even elected city-wide Mayors or council leaders can do nowadays, because the power has been brought back to Whitehall. As we have seen, however, Whitehall cannot run 24,000 schools from the centre.

Mr Howarth: As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood rightly said, Knowsley as a local borough council does not have a great deal of purchase in the situation, but it is worth placing on record the support we did get from the local authority and its officers with the Department to bring that about.

Mike Kane: I too praise Knowsley for all it is trying to do to get the best provision. It now has no hand in four of its schools, although it has soft power, and its direct influence is on only the two Roman Catholic schools, which are yet to be academised. They are all working as hard as they can with the Archdiocese of Liverpool.
The Government have embarked on an ambitious reform of A-levels to ensure that our young people are prepared for the demands of this country’s world-leading universities. The Government are determined to extend those opportunities to all parts of the country, and the Department has been working closely, as I have personally, with Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council to ensure that young people in Knowsley receive the high-quality education that they deserve and that they benefit from the Government’s reforms.

In April 2016, following a wide consultation, the principal of Halewood Academy announced that it would stop admitting pupils for A-level study from September 2016. There was low demand for A-levels at the school, with only 58 pupils studying for A-levels at the time of the announcement, and the school was struggling to be financially viable, as well as delivering poor-quality education. Its position would likely have continued to deteriorate because of the declining number of 16 to 18-year-olds in Knowsley, which is set to reduce by 17% between 2015 and 2020. As a result, pupils in Knowsley deciding to pursue A-levels would need to travel to nearby boroughs, where there is a breadth of choice, which established reputations for high-quality provision, such as Carmel College in St Helens, which the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood referred to, and Riverside College in Halton.

The need for A-level provision in Knowsley was kept under review by the local regional schools commissioner, and in June 2016 it was agreed that the RSC would work with the Educational Skills Funding Agency, the local authority and other local schools and colleges to improve post-16 provision. That would take into account the recommendations of the area review of post-16 provision in the Liverpool city region taking place at the time. Those reviews are designed to avoid the very gaps in provision that the hon. Lady is concerned about.

Along with the ESFA, the local authority’s executive director for children has been in discussion with Knowsley Community College, local headteachers, local businesses and outstanding local schools located outside the borough. The Department has continued to work with the borough’s director of children’s services to keep the demand for A-level provision under review. Following the area review recommendation for St Helen’s College and Knowsley Community College to merge, the Department ensured that A-level provision will be delivered at the Knowsley campus from September this year. The merged college’s published 2018-19 prospectus sets out a comprehensive A-level offer, with 21 different A-levels available. As the hon. Lady correctly stated, to date it has received 113 A-level applications for the 2018-19 academic year, and it is reviewing these in order to make an appropriate offer to each candidate, as in some cases pupils will undertake both A-Levels and vocational options, as is the case in many sixth-form colleges.

As well as ensuring future A-level provision in Knowsley, the Department has taken steps to address the historical educational under-achievement that has blighted the life chances of pupils in parts of Knowsley for too long. There have been—and still are—long-standing issues with the quality of secondary provision. That is why we are working closely with a number of organisations, including the Knowsley education commission, the Institute for Teaching, The Brilliant Club, Teach First and the local authority, to ensure an improvement in the quality of education in the borough. Knowsley Council has commissioned the development and implementation of Knowsley Better Together, which is a wider local plan to improve opportunities for pupils to study A-levels in Knowsley. This recognises the need for future A-level provision and, importantly, the need to improve schools’ performance at key stage 4 to prepare students for the demands of the new rigorous A-levels.

A range of targeted interventions have been put in place for academies in Knowsley, including the regional schools commissioner meeting the multi-academy trust responsible for those academies during the first term of this academic year, to ensure that rapid and sustained improvements are made. The Department will continue to monitor progress and work closely with the academies in Knowsley to address the quality of education at secondary level. I am very happy to make a commitment to meet regularly all the Members in the area who are concerned, together with the local authority and the regional schools commissioner, to maintain progress both in the secondary schools and in the primary schools in the borough. I have been doing this in a number of other local authority areas where I am concerned about standards. We can go school by school, including primary schools, to monitor what is happening and ensure that progress continues to be made.

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood for highlighting these issues. The Department will continue to work with the borough’s director of children’s services and other appropriate parties to ensure that A-level provision in Knowsley meets the demands and needs of its pupils. Significant work is under way to raise standards in Knowsley’s schools and to prepare pupils for A-level study. I will work with the hon. Lady and keep these issues under review.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of opportunity areas. There are 12 to begin with, and we want to ensure that they represent different parts of the country—rural, coastal, north-west and so on. Given that there is an opportunity area in Oldham, it was felt that Knowsley would not be an opportunity area at this point. We will learn from what has been happening in those opportunity areas, so that we can apply the lessons learnt to other parts of the country that are low down on the Social Mobility Commission’s index in due course.

On that note, I hope that the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood is happy with my response. I repeat: I am very happy and keen to work with right hon. and hon. Members to make sure that we are monitoring and doing everything we can to ensure that standards at both secondary and primary schools in the Knowsley area and the borough continue to rise, so that there is more possibility of 11-to-16 schools having sixth-form provision in future.

5.24 pm

Maria Eagle: I thank the Minister for his response, the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), for his contribution, and my colleagues for their support and contributions. I know that the Minister understands that this issue matters a great deal to those of us who have the honour of representing communities in Knowsley. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and

I will want to take him up on his offer of regularly reviewing the progress of schools and provision in Knowsley.

I am also sure that, although we wish schools well, we will want to look closely at what happens between now and September, to see how many young people apply for the new provision and what it means in practice, in terms of what A-levels are put on and how many people it takes to ensure that a particular course is run. Only by meeting the needs of pupils as they consider their future and ensuring that they can maximise their potential in life—their academic potential, as well as their economic potential later in life—can areas such as Knowsley hope to improve their economies and social mobility for the families in their communities, many of which are deprived, and in due course achieve a better future for all.

I thank everyone for coming along to the debate. We local representatives are not willing to let this matter pass. I welcome the Minister’s interest and I hope that, between us all, we can ensure that improvements in provision in Knowsley do not stop here, that there is no backsliding into an unacceptable position and that in due course all our young people can indeed take all the opportunities available to them to progress post-16 in education and in life.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered A-level provision in Knowsley Metropolitan Borough.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered funding for higher education.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, in a debate that I suspect has been slightly snow-affected. No doubt my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), who is standing in for the Minister, will say more about that in a moment. Also, I would like to thank Mr Barnaby Austin, who is a fine young man who is with me for three months. He has helped me to prepare my remarks today, so my thanks to him.

Like many Members, among my constituency duties I particularly enjoy interacting with sixth-formers in schools in my constituency, and I always feel encouraged coming away from those encounters. Not that everyone necessarily supports everything that the Government say or do, but I always feel encouraged that the coming generation is as bright, motivated and impressive as any has ever been. Looking forward, I feel that the country is in very safe hands.

Inevitably, as I am sure we have all experienced, the issue of student finance, student loans and tuition fees come up in those sessions. I have always been very happy over the last 10 years or so to support the system that we have, explaining that it is a generous system that does the job, that no one has to pay fees in advance and that it does not preclude anyone from going on to higher education. I am very happy to support the funding model that we have and always make the point that education is the best investment that any young person will ever make. A show of hands normally demonstrates pretty clearly that no one is ever deterred—or very few are—from accessing higher education as a result.

However, in the last few months I have been less sure about the fairness of the current arrangements and have been looking into some of the statistics on student finance. Therefore, I applied for this debate, to put on record a few concerns that I have and some thoughts about the future. I was both delighted and surprised that, after I had applied for this debate but before it was granted, the Prime Minister herself—perhaps picking up on my thoughts, leading wherever I go—has now announced her own review of student finance, which I greatly welcome. In particular, I support the important focus in the official terms of reference of the review, which seeks to ensure

“a funding system that provides value for money and works for students and taxpayers.”

I hope that this 90-minute debate provides us with an opportunity to explore together in a hopefully thoughtful way—it is a subject that deserves a thoughtful approach—how the system might be improved. I look forward to hearing the comments from colleagues from all parts of the House—I am sure that many have greater expertise in this area than I do—in trying to find a way forward to a system that is both fair and sustainable.

The current system of student tuition fees and loans as a means of funding higher education has achieved many positives over the years, not least an increase in the number of students from lower-income backgrounds entering higher education, which has to be a good thing.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a really thoughtful contribution, and I share his hope that we can have an interesting and useful debate. On the question of providing more opportunities for people from disadvantaged homes, the top-line numbers are clear. Does he recognise that there is a problem in the way that the system is limiting choice—there is substantial evidence that those from lower-income homes are seeking to minimise their financial liability by going local—and that, to give students real choice, issues relating to fees have to be wrapped up with those relating to maintenance?

Mr Streeter: I do agree with that, which is one of the reasons I am speaking today. I will talk about that in a moment, because the full-on higher education experience of going away to university and growing up during those three or four years, or however long it is, is an important part of the process. As I will set out in a moment, when a young person chooses to stay local and live with their parents or parent still, to me that is not the full-on experience, which is regrettable. I agree with the hon. Gentleman: I am beginning to see the top-line figures becoming quite a barrier to a number of people. I certainly would not want to be 24 with a debt of £40,000 hanging around my neck as I entered the workplace.

That is why we are here this morning: we have to try to find a new way forward together, and I very much welcome the Government’s review. I will briefly summarise the operation of the current system—although I know that you are an expert on it, Mr Hosie—then I will point out some of the areas in which it falls short and finally present my thoughts about the way forward.

As we know, currently universities in England can charge up to £9,250 a year for undergraduate tuition, with substantial variations in some parts of the United Kingdom, such as Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland—that is what devolution is all about. Students can apply to Student Finance Ltd for a non-means tested loan of up to £9,250 a year to cover the tuition fees, while also taking out loans to cover the cost of living while at university.

To reflect on that point for a moment, we sometimes look back to the old days of maintenance grants. I came to King’s College in London in the 1970s, between 1974 and 1977—I cannot believe it—and had a minimum grant, based on my parents’ financial circumstances. I do not want to do a Neil Kinnock, but I was the first Streeter in a thousand generations to go to university, and my parents did not really understand that they did not want to do a Neil Kinnock, but I was the first Streeter in a thousand generations to go to university, and my parents did not really understand that they could top the grant up, so I spent my three years in London with not very much money. It was still a wonderful experience, but it was not all gold in the old days, depending on people’s circumstances. I hope my parents never get to read the Hansard report of this debate, because they are wonderful people.
Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): You might get a cheque in the post.

Mr Streeter: It would be a little bit late, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for the thought.

Repayment of loans is a shared responsibility between the Student Loans Company and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. The Student Loans Company receives all its funding from the UK Government and the devolved Administrations. Therefore, the system is based on the student owing however much money he or she needed to borrow to get through university and gradually paying it back during their working lifetime. Perhaps not surprisingly, 93% of all students in England take up student loans.

The total amount of debt that an average student who completes a three-year undergraduate course will owe has now risen to around £50,000, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. That sum will include just under £6,000 in interest accrued during the period of study, at a rate of up to 6.1%. A student who has taken out a loan will begin repaying 9% of their income when they are earning higher than the repayment threshold, and any unpaid debts are written off after 30 years. Broadly, that is the system.

The Government announced in October 2017 that the repayment threshold on student debts would be raised from £21,000 to £25,000, commencing from April 2018. At the same time, the fee cap was frozen at £9,250.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I commend the hon. Gentleman for making a very good speech. He has just outlined the way that the system is currently working, but does he agree that what is happening now is not what people anticipated when the coalition Government introduced it? They anticipated that there would be differential fees—different amounts paid at different universities—but because the system has not worked, a whole generation has been left with enormous debts. The system is absolutely broken, and the levels of interest are unacceptable. We really have to change it quite dramatically. Does he agree?

Mr Streeter: I do agree. I am looking for change and I think the Government are looking for change, which I guess is why the review is taking place. When the level of fees was increased, we were led to believe that different universities would charge different fees. Some of us who have been around for quite a long time recognised that that might not happen, and indeed all universities went for the maximum more or less straight away. However, the reason why we are here today and why the Government are reviewing this matter is that the system is not working as planned, and we now need to see some real change. That is very much what I am calling for.

Under our current system, students in the United Kingdom are landed with the greatest amounts of student debt in the developed world—greater even than the notoriously large student debts in the United States of America, which reach an average of $36,000 on graduation. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has recently reported that 77% of UK graduates will never pay off their full debt, even if they are still repaying in their fifties, and that is projected to rise to 83% once the new figures have been introduced. This is an important point: we have a system that is almost set up to fail. Built into the system is an understanding that most of the people who participate will not repay. I do not want that system in place for the long term. When graduates immediately move abroad, that results in more unpaid debts. When a graduate’s employer is not UK-based, they are not subject to the automatic repayment system as they would be in the United Kingdom. In 2014, it was estimated that, by 2042, £90 billion of student support funded by the Treasury will remain unpaid.

It is certainly right for students to contribute to the cost of obtaining a degree. The stats still demonstrate that, over a lifetime, a graduate is likely to earn significantly more than a non-graduate. According to Universities UK:

“Official figures are clear that, on average, university graduates continue to earn substantially more than non-graduates and are more likely to be in employment.”

In debates with sixth-formers and others, I guess many of us have argued, “Why should a proverbial taxi driver who does not have a degree pay extra tax to help others improve their income?” There are pushbacks and answers to that, but it is still a compelling and important point. We must remember that the figures involved are significant, with each new crop of student loans being £13 billion a year. That is a substantial sum that we are having to find to support students going to university.

The principle of students contributing to their own higher education is surely right, but it must be sustainable. I am beginning to see that it is not sustainable for someone to have a debt of up to £50,000 around their neck when they enter the workplace.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that some students, particularly those from a disadvantaged background, will experience much higher debt than that because their families are unable to support them financially? Students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering the workplace will have a much higher burden of debt.

Mr Streeter: I agree that people who are not able to draw down on the bank of mum and dad have a much tougher time. The figures I am quoting presuppose that someone has taken out loans for tuition fees and support. I think they are the maximum figures. I think the point that the hon. Lady and I would agree on is that there are students who do not rack up that kind of debt because they get support. Once again, there is an issue of fairness for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

That debt is certainly a hindrance to getting on the housing ladder, to which 85% of young people aspire. It is something that the Government are desperate to encourage. If we are to meet the aspirations of generation rent, we might have to remove some of the burden from their backs. The prospect of having such a large debt hanging over their heads inevitably leads to some mental health worries among higher education students and graduates. In 2015, a study published in the Journal of Public Health, entitled “The impact of tuition fees amount on mental health over time in British students”, found that in the UK,

“poor mental health in students has been linked to financial problems, considering dropping out for financial reasons, financial concern, being in debt and concern about debt.”
It is worth noting that countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Finland and, more recently, Germany have moved away from the tuition fee model.

There are big questions about whether universities provide proper value for money for their degrees and offer favourable returns for graduates. The National Audit Office reported that two thirds of students consider that universities do not provide decent value for money.

More students—especially those from poorer backgrounds, to come back to the point we were debating a few moments ago—are choosing to stay at home and attend their local university due to fears over unsustainable debt. That is a regrettable trend, because the whole university experience is partly about moving away from home for the first time, growing up and learning independence.

Mr Streeter: That is a good point. I represent the city of Plymouth. We have an excellent university, but it is particularly strong in certain fields. If someone is minded to stay local because of cost and debt and they want to become—I had better choose my subject carefully, because I do not want to diss any of its faculties, which are all excellent—a top-notch lawyer, they might not want to choose Plymouth. They might prefer Exeter. I think I have got myself into trouble here. I thank the hon. Gentleman for leading me down that path. Plymouth is an excellent university for all subjects, but he makes a compelling point.

Moving on, what might we do? We are right to ensure that students contribute. We want universities to be properly funded, but how can we make the system fairer and more sustainable? I have welcomed the excellently timed Government review, and I very much look forward to the outcome.

Universities could do more to reduce their costs. They are slightly strange organisations. In one sense, they are neither private sector nor public sector. They are a hybrid and in many ways they are perhaps unaccountable. The salaries of vice-chancellors is just one issue—acting on them would not have a huge impact, but would be emblematic. At the University of Bath the vice-chancellor’s salary is £471,000, at the London Business School it is £448,000, and at the University of Southampton it is £424,000. How can the leader of a university earn three times more than the Prime Minister of this country? I do not understand that, and it has to be tackled. It is a bit like people wagging their fingers at us and saying, “MPs all earn so much money.” Having proper oversight of vice-chancellor salaries would not save much money, but it would send a signal, bearing in mind that students contribute 50% of the cost of those salaries. The salaries are utterly outrageous and something needs to be done. Perhaps the Minister will touch on that when he winds up.

Paul Blomfield: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Streeter: Yes, I enjoy giving way.

Paul Blomfield: Given the numbers here today, there is an opportunity to have a good interactive discussion. I will try not to lead the hon. Gentleman into difficult territory with this intervention. He is absolutely right about vice-chancellors’ pay. The sector has got it wrong, and in some cases spectacularly. Does he accept that the problem is that people have said to universities, “Behave like the big businesses you are”, and are then complaining when they do? Does he think we should have the same approach to unacceptably high pay in all parts of the private and public sectors?

Mr Streeter: If an individual sets up their own business and still owns it then it is up to them what they pay themselves, but other than that I tend to agree about large salaries at the top justified by being in a marketplace and having to compete with other organisations. The charitable sector is another one where we have seen massive chief executive officer salaries. I imagine that if many people knocking on doors raising money for charities really knew what was going on, they would not be so happy. There is a job to be done in all these sectors, perhaps sparked by the Government, to have more reasonable levels of pay at the top. The gap to those at the top must be very dispiriting for those humbly working day in, day out for not very much money. I recognise that we need to do more about that. The Government have talked about it, and I support them.

I have three specific proposals before I sit down. There are two quick ones, and one where I will go into greater depth.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need the Government to look at sustainability in the sector? The briefing for this debate said that the forecast surplus for the university sector is only 1.3% this year, so it is not a bloated sector. It does not mean there is a differential outcome for various institutions. In fact, university budgets are under threat from Brexit, from the cuts in research funding, from the fall in part-time students, and from a possible fall in international students, not to mention demographic trends in our country. We have to be careful to ensure a sustainable funding system.

Mr Streeter: I agree. When the panel reports its findings, I hope the Government take action to help us put in place a system that is both fair and sustainable. We have a world-class university system in this country that we must not in any way seek to undermine. It is hugely important that, as young people increasingly compete with people from other countries, we keep our highest university standards.

Daniel Zeichner: It is important to recognise that there is a dispute going on in higher education at the moment and that staff have been out on cold picket lines. Whatever one’s view of that dispute, it is partly about how resources are allocated and ensuring we have a sustainable system. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need an urgent resolution to the dispute? If we are to support academics in future, they must have a pension scheme in which they can have confidence.

Mr Streeter: I must confess I do not know the details of the current dispute. I am not a huge supporter of strikes, but I agree that it would be better to have the
Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah):

get through university is more reasonable and fair than things. First, a system based on the ability to pay rather increases across income bands. What is the point? Two percentage paid back is determined by income and but one option is to have a banded system in which the owed. The exact percentage of earnings that graduates period of time once they start work. That removes the university, and the student would pay a contribution in low or no tuition fees to the student. The Government in a little more detail, for the first time in my life I wonder whether it is time to consider a graduate contribution system in place of the current tuition fees and student loans: in other words, what some people would call a graduate tax. We have all been involved in debates over the years in which we have said that that is an absolutely disastrous idea but, for the reasons that I am about to give, I think it should be reconsidered. A graduate contribution tax is essentially a system sub in which the student becomes obligated to an income-related additional tax on graduating in return for Government subsidisation of higher education, resulting in low or no tuition fees to the student. The Government would in effect pay all or most of the fees directly to the university, and the student would pay a contribution over and above ordinary levels of tax for a limited period of time once they start work. That removes the burden of individual borrower accounts or balances owed. The exact percentage of earnings that graduates would be required to pay back would be up for discussion, but one option is to have a banded system in which the percentage paid back is determined by income and increases across income bands. What is the point? Two things. First, a system based on the ability to pay rather than the amount of money the student has borrowed to get through university is more reasonable and fair than the current system.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and register the fact that I have arrived at the debate. The point about a system based on the ability to pay is important. In a sense, the current system is a hybrid between a loan and a graduate contribution system. People pay 9% of their income, so those who earn a lot more pay a lot more of the loan back, and people who earn a lot less pay less back. There is already a significant taxpayer subsidy up to about 45%. I want to put on the record that the current system is a hybrid between the graduate contribution system that he is outlining and a loan system.

Mr Streeter: The Minister is absolutely right to make that point.

The second reason why I think a fresh look might be helpful is that, under a graduate contribution scheme, students would not leave university with the worries associated with personally owing so many thousands of pounds. There would be no massive debt figure around their neck. I know the Minister was snowed in this morning, so I am not sure whether he heard me say that I am coming to the view that young people having a personal debt of £40,000 or £50,000 around their neck as they enter the workplace is becoming a massive problem that we need to think about. I hope the review will look at that.

I believe that the vast majority of graduates would be happy to pay a fair income-contingent contribution in return for the direct payment of fees by the Government, thus breaking the perceived link between the cost of tuition and repayments from students. Such a change would hopefully serve to alleviate some of the mental health worries faced by students and graduates who, on finishing university, receive the infamous letter outlining how many tens of thousands of pounds they now owe: “Congratulations on graduating. Now we want the money back.” Paying a regular, reasonable graduate contribution through tax gives far less reason to worry than the contents of those letters sent to graduates. A graduate contribution system would also provide the Treasury and higher education institutions with a long-term guaranteed stream of money as graduates pay regular instalments of additional tax in line with their incomes over a certain number of working years.

The Minister might like to reflect on this next point. It would be possible also to tailor the contribution system to change the rate of tax on degrees that the Government are keen to encourage, perhaps in science, technology, engineering and maths subjects, and nursing, as an inducement for students to pursue those degree courses and consequent careers. I can see that the Minister is not leaping to his feet to agree with me. He will no doubt deal with that point when he winds up the debate later.

Obviously, training and recruiting sufficient nurses to meet the growing needs of our NHS is becoming a huge priority for our country. The Royal College of Nursing, which I had a meeting with recently in my constituency, informs me that applications to nursing courses have fallen by 33% since tuition fees for undergraduate nursing were introduced. The Government wisely said that they would review the impact on nurse training and recruitment once the new system had been in place for a year or two. We are now approaching that moment in time. I hope the review currently being undertaken by the Government will reflect on that and make recommendations. We cannot have a system that starves our NHS of sufficient nurses for the future, because that would be short-sighted.

Carol Monaghan: Coupled with that we have the issue of the sharp decline in EU nurses applying for positions here in the UK.

Mr Streeter: Yes, I agree, and one of the many consequences of the decision made by the people of our country in June 2016—

Carol Monaghan: Not my country.

Mr Streeter: Well, the decision was made by the majority of people in the United Kingdom. One of the consequences is that fewer doctors and nurses are coming
here to work in our NHS. That is a very regrettable problem, but there we are. We are democrats and will therefore comply with the wishes of the people.

I hope my thoughts are useful to the Government—I can see the Minister nodding his head—as we try to find our way to a system that is fair and reasonable to students and taxpayers alike, and that ensures that the United Kingdom encourages the brightest and the best to reach their potential through higher education. I look forward to the rest of the debate and the Minister’s response.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, particularly as you have experience and this is my first experience of speaking in a Westminster Hall debate. I hope you will be tolerant with me. I thank my hon.

practice it may, slightly counterintuitively, benefit only

wealthier graduates. Even with that reduction, the tuition fee would remain hefty, and it would become easier for higher-income students to pay it off altogether, while lower-income graduates would still end up potentially with 30 years’ worth of debt to pay. Moreover, the immediate income of universities from the loan repayments of higher-income students would decrease. Smaller, more modern universities, such as the University of Northampton in my constituency and the University of Derby, would be affected the most, because they rely on tuition fees to survive more than the elite, more market-manageable, more international universities with various external sources of funding. Furthermore, it is newer universities that tend to recruit a high proportion of their students and graduates from lower-income families.

The problem, however, is not without a range of solutions, one of which could be the reintroduction of some kind of maintenance grant for disadvantaged students. Although cutting fees may not lead to financial support for those who need it the most, grants would be targeted specifically towards lower-income students. We also need other solutions as part of a toolkit. The format of today’s debate is useful in that respect, because we are not just standing up and saying, “This is the solution to the issue,” which would not be the right approach.

One solution might be to encourage private investment, and partnering up with private sector institutions. High-quality education leads to skills that are good for business. Revising skills and education, and adapting that to economic needs, as has been touched upon, could lead to new sources of funding. In the form of grants from the private sector to university students and institutions, and to even more private investment in research—an area in which UK universities are very much world-leaders.

Only a few months ago, in November, the University of Northampton was one of six universities that contributed to an independent review of social impact investment in the UK made by the Treasury, showing that they are very much up to speed with what is going on in the sector. Part of that involves catching the eye of companies for financial partnerships. The university is moving from the constituency of my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), to an exciting new campus in my constituency of Northampton South, which is leading regeneration. Universities have a key role in that in obvious ways, such as buildings and the presence of the students, and in less obvious ways, such as changing and mixing up the culture of a neighbourhood. That brings potential problems, but if managed correctly it can bring significant benefits.

Another aspect that needs to be considered is that, although graduates can officially leave university with debts of £50,000, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon began by saying—that sum of money is a key point in the debate—many never repay those sums, owing to the nature of the loan agreements, as they do not reach a certain level of income. The level of graduate contributions thus depends on the salary level that the students get after leaving university, which in turns depends partially on the skills and education that they received. However, the fact that that huge burden of debt is not, in many senses, actually there is lost on people due to the way in which the system is set up, expressed, and currently administered. There is scope in
the reforms that have been put forward and the review that has been announced to look at the system not just presentationally, but in terms of how it operates.

Investing in universities is a healthy approach to getting funds into the institutions and providing opportunities for low-income students to study. The University of Derby has invested £120 million in facilities over the past five years, and graduate outcomes have improved markedly as a result, which is really the point of all such investments. Some 74.1% of students are in graduate-level roles within six months. We all know that education is the foundation of a good, productive economy and a rich, diverse society. It will always remain a top priority for the Government, and it should not be overlooked by today's innovators and entrepreneurs, who will be the beneficiaries of it as well.

We have a terrific university sector in the UK. It is the envy of the rest of Europe and attracts huge numbers of international students. Despite changes that have taken place, which have been referred to, those numbers are still very strong. Our changes need to be forward-looking and build on that success. Although I am a great lover of nostalgia, I do not think that solutions should hark back to what was a much more elite and restricted past in the university sector.

10.7 am

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute with you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I had not intended to speak today, but I was interested to hear what the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) had to say, and I have obviously been inspired by his contribution.

I want to make a few, probably disjointed points, the first of which is about the sustainability of the sector. As has been pointed out, we have one of the best higher education sectors in the world. At a time of uncertainty for the country, we ought to build on our strengths, and not do anything to undermine them. When the Minister winds up, I hope that he will assure us on how the review will maintain, or indeed strengthen, the sustainability of the sector.

There is a fear that, because of the way that the debate has opened up, the Government may intend simply to mitigate the costs by constraining fees without replacing them with teaching grants, rather than looking ambitiously at how the system works, as the hon. Gentleman suggested. Clearly, a move to reduce fees in certain subjects could have the perverse consequence of leading people in a contrary direction to the one suggested by the hon. Gentleman. Likewise, a fee cut that is not replaced by teaching grants across the board, or in any other way, could really bring into question the sustainability of the sector.

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend is making a really important point, which I hope the Minister can address. There is real concern among universities that the review could result in a huge loss of income. As I said earlier, the whole of the sector is not making a huge surplus. We want our university sector to thrive, compete globally, and give our young people and others the skills that they need to compete in the workforce. My hon. Friend has raised an important point, and it is one that the Minister needs to address.

Paul Blomfield: I agree with my hon. Friend. In his introductory remarks, the hon. Member for South West Devon rightly said that when the new system was introduced in 2012, there was an expectation of a variety of fee options. I shared his scepticism at that time. There was a thinking in Government that the £6,000 to £9,000 range would mean that Oxbridge, obviously, would charge £9,000, and everybody else would neatly rank themselves in accordance with the Government's perception of quality. Those of us who had a relationship with the sector knew that that was not viable, because it costs as much to provide a degree in Plymouth as it does in Russell Group universities. So what happened was not surprising.

Although the review should focus on value for money, as the hon. Gentleman said, we need to be careful not to reduce higher education to a crude transactional relationship. There is an element within the teaching excellence framework that does that.

I was on the Higher Education and Research Public Bill Committee. Those of us on this side of the House supported the principle of focusing on teaching quality, but we were worried that some of the metrics drove the debate in the wrong direction. We are pleased that the Government moved more towards a qualitative evaluation, rather than the simple crude quantitative measures they were initially looking at, but there is still an aspect of the debate that says we should be measuring quality by crude and easily measurable standards. We might take contact hours, for example. If we are going to measure by contact hours, Oxford would be bottom of the table. Nobody would argue that Oxford is the worst university in the country, but that illustrates the danger of crude metrics.

Andrew Lewer: Although crude metrics are not helpful, would the hon. Gentleman accept that having some metrics, such as the teaching excellence framework, is helpful?

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Gentleman is right. As I said, those of us on this side of the House who were on the Bill Committee, such as my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), argued that a focus on teaching quality was right, but we needed to get the way that we measured that experience right.

The other metric that is problematic is employment outcomes. The current Minister’s predecessor, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), acknowledged that they were crude and, in a sense, unreliable metrics, but they were being used because they were the numbers that were available. I pointed out to the Minister at the time that there is not necessarily a relationship between teaching quality and employment outcomes. If a student had been to Eton and Oxford, like he had, and were from the right family and knew the right people, that person’s employment outcome was likely to be fairly good, irrespective of teaching quality. So when looking at the funding review, my warning is that we should make sure that we look at the educational experience of universities in the round. We argued that there should have been a statement in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 about what universities were for.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised the discussion we had in that Bill Committee about what universities contribute to our society in
addition to teaching and education. They contribute to sports development, cultural development and social outcomes in our communities. They do a lot of voluntary work. Students from my own university, Durham, do a lot of voluntary work in the local community. If we are going to look at value for money, which I agree we should, we felt that the additional benefits that universities deliver to society should somehow be brought into the equation as well, and there was certainly a danger under that legislation of the wider benefits of universities being completely discarded in the Government’s TEF measures.

Paul Blomfield: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Clearly, we are at one on that issue.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I apologise for being late for the debate, Mr Hosie. My hon. Friends make an interesting and important point. In Coventry, universities make a major contribution to the local economy, for example. Very often, we find that students are also helpful to community organisations. Sometimes, someone who is doing a law course can give unofficial advice, which is helpful, given the situation we now face with cutbacks. The other point is that further education has taken a bit of a hit as well. In Coventry, there have been 27% cuts.

Paul Blomfield: I have visited the university that my hon. Friend represents. It does particularly innovative and good work in supporting small businesses and is a leader in the sector. He makes an important point. At a time when one of the issues we face as a country is the imbalance in the economy between London and the south-east and the rest of the country, universities offer a unique asset in ensuring that economic growth is distributed across the country. They are the one asset that we have in every part of the UK, in its regions and nations. The role that they play in driving economic growth is hugely important. My hon. Friend makes that point very well.

I have three additional points. First, will the Minister answer the question—which the Education Secretary was unable to in the statement the other day—relating to widening participation and fair access funds? There is a concern that one of the ways in which the sector will be squeezed in order to hit ambitions on fees is by reducing the amount of money allocated to widening participation and fair access. Investment in that area was one of the few good things that came out of the 2012 reforms, so I would be grateful if he could give a reassurance on that.

Mr Gyimah: I would like to give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance now. He is absolutely right: the widening participation funds—£1,000 out of every £9,000 paid by students in fees—go towards access. We will not be doing anything to diminish that access project. Although many people talk about the fact that we have global, world-class institutions, one of the successes of our higher education system is actually the number of disadvantaged people who are going to university as a result of those funds being available. There is a challenge in making sure that they are successful at university and get well-paid jobs. We will not be doing anything to diminish that.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for that intervention. As we said earlier, fairness of opportunity and the choices available depending on where a person lives are issues in the current system. The widening participation and fair access programmes are hugely important, and I am grateful for the Minister’s assurance that not one penny will be taken from those areas of funding.

I endorse the point that the hon. Member for South West Devon made about nursing, midwifery and allied health courses. When we had a debate on the Government’s proposals in this Chamber previously, some of us challenged the Government and said that taking away bursaries and introducing fees for those courses would lead to a drop in applications. The then Minister, who is no longer a Member of the House, assured us that what the Government were trying to do—you couldn’t make it up, Mr Hosie—was share the benefits of the funding system for other undergraduates with nursing and midwifery courses. Share the benefits! Some of us questioned whether a £50,000 debt was a benefit, and warned of the sort of drop in applications that we are now seeing. I hope the Minister will tell us that the decision about the funding arrangements for nursing, midwifery and allied health courses will be reconsidered as part of the funding review, and that the Government will put on hold the current proposals to extend those arrangements to other health courses that are not currently subject to fees and loans. The Minister is obviously aware of those areas.

The Opposition have tabled prayers seeking a halt to those proposals.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said, a number of things are coming together and will cause an enormous crisis in the NHS, but that is not the only issue. Nursing, midwifery and allied health courses are one of the few areas for second-chance education. They are dominated significantly by mature students, who see them as a route into a professional career and personal advancement, which is not available through the 2012 funding system. Since the 2012 funding system was introduced, there has been a significant drop in the number of mature students.

Mr Jim Cunningham: We have raised the issue of education maintenance grants many times in this place. Women often have an ambition to go into nursing when their children grow up, and they are affected because they cannot get education maintenance grants. This is a very important issue, and once again women are carrying the can.

Paul Blomfield: Again, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. From the point of view of the needs of the NHS and the opportunities for mature students, and just for the sake of justice, we need to look again at nursing, midwifery and allied health courses.

I will make my third point very briefly, because this is a much bigger topic. I raise this issue as co-chair of the all-party group on international students. Universities’ financial stability is partly based on this country’s enormous success in attracting international students to come and study here. Those numbers are flattening as a result of measures taken by the Home Office and the inclusion of international students in the net migration numbers, which inevitably leads to policy decisions that discourage international students. The Minister will say that the...
numbers are holding roughly up, but holding roughly up is not good enough in a growing market, because it means a relative decline.

There is a huge risk as we leave the European Union, because some 125,000 of our 450,000 international students come from the EU, and most universities are modelling on the basis that we will lose about 80% of them. One third of non-EU students said before the referendum that if we chose to leave the European Union, they would find the UK a less attractive place to come to. The Government need to put in place measures within the framework of the strategy to actively encourage more international students. They can start by removing them from the net migration targets.

Carol Monaghan: One of the other issues with international students is that we have lost a lot of the diversity within that group. Whereas in the past, students came from India, Australia, the United States and Canada, we are more and more relying on the Chinese student population. That is problematic, because if anything happens politically to change that relationship, our universities could have difficulties.

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. The numbers have been sustained only by the huge increase in the number of Chinese students. Of course, Chinese students are very welcome in the UK, but no business would be satisfied with becoming over-dependent on one customer. China is moving ahead in leaps and bounds in developing its own universities, and now has some of the finest universities in the world, doing some of the finest research in the world, so we cannot rely on that market. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that part of the new strategy that we need to encourage people to come from all over the world needs to be about looking at countries such as India, from which the numbers have dropped.

10.25 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) for securing this debate. I listened to his speech with interest, and surprisingly I found myself nodding along to a lot of what he said. We have had an admission from the Prime Minister that the current system in England is not working for students. Admitting we have got it wrong is one thing, but actually carrying out a review and making appropriate changes is another. I worry that we might get stuck in the detail.

I will try to limit my comments about Scotland, where the Scottish National party has restored the tradition of free higher education while maintaining educational maintenance allowance for those in school or further education, and bursaries for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education. Our support package works: Scottish 18-year-olds from the most disadvantaged areas are now 67% more likely to apply to higher education institutions than they were 12 years ago. Scottish students graduate with the lowest debt in the UK. Their debt is less than £12,000, which contrasts with the astronomical figures we have heard about this morning. We believe that university education should be based on the ability to learn, and never on the ability to pay.

Mr Gyimah: To be absolutely clear, university education in England is not based on the ability to pay. On the contrary, no one has failed to get a university place in England because they cannot pay. Payment is only significant after the graduate earns more than £21,000—it will be earnings of more than £25,000 from 1 April. It is important to get the facts right.

Carol Monaghan: We also have to look at the retention rates for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who do not have full support.

Ultimately, this debate should be about who benefits. We educate children in schools not simply for their own economic benefit, but for the benefit of society. We have got to ask whether the young people embarking on tertiary education courses will contribute economically and societally to our nations, or whether we are simply providing them with a service, for which they must pay. As legislators, we must be clear about that. Post-Brexit, the UK’s economic success will rely on a well-educated population. We have skills shortages in science, technology, engineering, healthcare, education and digital. Graduates are needed now to ensure that the UK remains competitive outside the EU.

The hon. Member for South West Devon mentioned the variance in fees. I have difficulties with that. If as has been rumoured we lower the fees for less expensive courses, how will we encourage our young people to study the more expensive science, technology, engineering and maths subjects, graduates of which are so desperately needed? EngineeringUK estimates that we have an annual shortfall of 20,000 engineering graduates alone. The hon. Member for South West Devon mentioned the impact of removing the nursing bursary. Again, who benefits? We should encourage young people to study those courses, not put additional barriers in their way.

Fees are not the only difficulty for English students. The interest on student loans has risen sharply—it is currently 6.1% for some students. Maintenance grants have been scrapped, and it is rumoured that student debt on completion has reached £50,000. Many young graduates will be left saddled with debt throughout most of their working lives.

The hon. Member for South West Devon mentioned students staying at home for their university experience, and was concerned about the impact on the whole package experienced by students at university. In Scotland and Ireland there is a cultural predisposition to stay at home. It is not necessarily financially driven—my son is staying at home during university—so there may be other factors at play. His education is not impacted. Students have opportunities for other life experiences, such as summer placements, industrial placements and travelling abroad. The hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) mentioned Erasmus, which is a rich experience for students even if they stay at home during university. I push the Minister to make a commitment on Erasmus, because university students and many people across the sector want that commitment as part of the Brexit process.

We are often told that our free tuition policy in Scotland prevents Scottish students from accessing available places, but since 2007, the number of Scottish-domiciled full-time degree entrants has risen by 12%. Since 2013, the total number of funded places available at Scottish
universities, including additional places to widen access for students from Scotland’s most deprived communities, has also increased. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central mentioned the metrics used in the teaching excellence framework, and graduate success as an indication of our universities’ quality. Graduate salaries are a lot lower in many geographical areas in the UK, so students graduating in parts of England and Scotland will automatically have a lower salary than those in south-east England. That is a flaw in that metric.

We often talk about the number of young people going to higher education as a measure of economic success. I could not count the number of times I hear people talking about encouraging people to do high-quality apprenticeships, yet that seems to be forgotten when we talk about higher education. I would like there to be parity among apprenticeships, further education colleges and quality employment. In fact, we should look at positive destinations, not just the number of young people going to university. For many young people, a high-quality apprenticeship—degree level or otherwise—allows them to make excellent progress in the workplace without necessarily saddling themselves with debt.

Dr Blackman-Woods: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Does she agree that it is important not to talk in binary terms about university or technical education? Our universities deliver some of the best technical education in the world, and we should aim for a route to success that is not tied to the binary divide, but ensure that we make connections between them.

Carol Monaghan: We have a problem if we educate only graduates—we need a full range of different people with different skills. I usually speak about tertiary education because, in Scotland, the lines between further education and higher education are less defined than they are in other parts of the UK. In fact, a lot of our degree courses are delivered in further education colleges. The movement between FE and HE is a very important part of our educational landscape in Scotland.

Positive destinations should be a measure of success, and we should encourage young people of all backgrounds into whatever is appropriate for them. That includes those from the most advantaged backgrounds considering apprenticeships. We need to try to break down that barrier. I agree with the hon. Member for South West Devon that vice-chancellor pay has reached a ridiculous level for some. Lecturers were out on strike this week and last week because their pensions are under threat. I agree with him that perhaps the time has come to look at the pay package that we offer all staff.

Paying for education is a duty of Government, business and society, including the taxpayer. We need to ensure that we have a well-educated population that can provide economic growth in different businesses and sectors. Post-Brexit, there will be a struggle to create economic growth. We all have the duty to pay our taxes so that they fund the education of our young people, benefit society and fuel economic growth. The Scottish National party is fully committed to guaranteeing fair access to higher education, so that every young person, regardless of background, has an equal chance to go to university. My party will continue to work hard to ensure that.

10.37 am

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing the debate. He spoke thoughtfully. We are both of the Kinnock generation, so I understand some of his points. He talked about his experiences in schools and people going to university. We must recognise the heart of the debate is not just the people who speak about what they might be deterred from, but the people who keep silent. The people who keep silent, whether they are older or younger learners, are being put off by the current financial structure that the Government have put in place.

The hon. Gentleman made a number of interesting suggestions about graduate tax and cutting the interest rates from 6.1%. There is consensus on that across the piece. We would have more sympathy with the Government if they had not been so intensely relaxed, and indeed complacent, when the interest rates were introduced. It was very clear that the previous Universities Minister—no doubt because he was a keen remainder—did not take into account in any shape or form the implications of Brexit in that respect. Two months before the referendum, inflation stood at 0.4%, but it is now 3.1% and rising. That is one of the reasons why the interest rate is 6.1%.

I welcome the thoughtful comments made by the hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer). He made very sensible points about governance in higher education. He rightly touched on the impact on post-1992 universities if fee aversion hits the disadvantaged students they cater for, and talked about his experiences with the two universities he is associated with—the University of Northampton and the University of Derby. I support all that, but I remind him and the House that fee aversion is an issue not simply for students but for the taxpayer. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) made exactly that point in response to last week’s statement. The Government have tried to make a virtue out of necessity by saying, “Oh, you don’t really need to repay all this money,” but we are irresponsibly laying burdens on future generations and on the tax system now. The Government should not be complacent about that in any way.

Mr Gyimah: I look forward to hearing the hon. Gentleman outline the Labour party’s policy. His concern is burden on the taxpayer, but there would be an even bigger burden on the taxpayer if higher education were made free—that is my understanding of the Labour party’s policy—unless places were rationed.

Gordon Marsden: There were several completely unproven assertions in what the Minister just said. He would do better to stick to this debate, which is about his policies rather than—

Mr Gyimah rose—

Gordon Marsden: No, I am not going to take another intervention. The Minister will have plenty of time to say what he wants to say.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) rightly talked about the sustainability of the sector and some of the key issues in terms of Brexit. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South
(Mr Cunningham), who is no longer in the Chamber, absolutely rightly drew us back to further education and nursing bursaries, and the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) spoke about issues post-Brexit.

The point is very straightforward: since coming to office in 2010, Conservative-led Governments have repeatedly raised tuition fees. They trebled fees to £9,000 and subsequently increased them to £9,250. That agenda has hit students—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—harder and harder since 2012. The cutting, one by one, of all the concessions that David Willetts introduced to temper the impact has been just as damaging. Those concessions were dismantled deliberately. The National Union of Students lists them in its briefing for the debate: the Government abolished maintenance grants, NHS bursaries, the disabled students allowance and the education maintenance allowance, and ended Aimhigher.

The Minister has inherited that. He is not responsible for it, but he would be wise to show due humility about its incremental impact on the people concerned. If he reads the “Fairer Fees” report published by the Sutton Trust late last year, he will see, as Members have already said, that the average debt for students in England is higher than the European average and twice the US average. As a result, the Government have racked up an unenviable record of nudging people away from higher education and chipping off many of the rungs of the ladder of social mobility that were designed to protect them.

The July report by London Economics for the University and College Union suggested that thousands of graduates would suffer a mid-life tax crisis, analysis undertaken last year by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows the level of debt, and only this week the Sutton Trust gave us figures that show disadvantaged students across the UK are more than three times more likely to live at home while attending university. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West made that point, too.

The Prime Minister finally admitted last week, after months of us, the Sutton Trust and an impressive range of stakeholders all saying the same, that the current funding system leaves the most disadvantaged students with the highest debt, yet behind the warm words and soft soap that were laddled out by the Prime Minister in Derby and by her Education Secretary in the Commons, it seems that no new money is available and there is the potential for HE funding cuts. In her speech, the Prime Minister tried to talk the talk on social mobility and aspiration, but she did little to walk the walk and address either the FE sector, in which 10% of HE is delivered, or the problems with 16-to-18 provision that many colleges are suffering, including the one in which she chose to make her speech. It will take more than a brush-by in Derby one afternoon in February to remedy those issues.

The terms of reference published by the Department state that the review cannot make recommendations on tax policy and must make recommendations in keeping with the Government’s fiscal policies. Will the Minister confirm that that means there will be no new money for the policies in the review? Does it mean that savings will have to be found elsewhere in the FE budget if changes are to be made? My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central challenged him and, to give him credit, he made a commitment that access and widening participation funding will not be diminished as a result of the review. Will he warn him that the Treasury has a long reach and he will need a stout shield to resist it in this area and others.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Does my hon. Friend agree that, unless the Government are at least prepared to put more money into the sector, it is difficult to understand how we will get a sustainable system for funding universities? The Minister needs to be clear about that.

Gordon Marsden: I absolutely agree. As the Minister is eager to explore our policies, I remind him that Labour’s policies and our message of progression were taken on board so strongly by would-be and existing students, their families and their parents during the recent election because we had a cohesive narrative. Whether we were talking about adult learning, college learning or traditional cohorts of young people going into higher education, we said that we wanted to lift barriers and financial burdens to make a step change in social mobility. The Conservatives did not put that message across, and suffered accordingly. Given the restrictions on the review, they will miss another opportunity.

The Conservatives continue to falter on the reintroduction of maintenance grants, to which we have been committed for nearly two years. The Prime Minister engaged with that tortuously last week. Our position is echoed by the education sector, Universities UK, MillionPlus, the Chair of the Education Committee, the Treasury Committee and even the vice-chancellor of the private University of Buckingham, Sir Anthony Seldon. UUK has said that there are ways in which the current system can be improved, such as by reintroducing maintenance grants, as has MillionPlus, but it is likely that colleges and universities will be expected to cover any extra costs. The Prime Minister implied that in her speech last week when she said the Government will have to look at how “learners receive maintenance support, both from Government and universities and colleges.”

We have some idea of how that extra funding might be delivered under her policies: by robbing Peter to pay Paul. We saw the same sleight of hand from the Secretary of State in The Sunday Times, on the BBC and in his statement last week, when he talked about cutting the cost of tuition fees.

The bottom line is that those who already have a lot will be given more. Wealthy students and graduates will benefit the most, because they can pay off debt the earliest. Over the next 10 years, there will be 13 million vacancies but only 7 million school leavers to fill them, yet great swathes of our university extramural departments, institutions such as the Open University and Birkbeck, and new providers, have been swept away or at least crippled by the tripling of fees since 2012.

There is a social dimension. One in five undergraduate entrants in England from low-participation neighbourhoods chooses or has no option but to study part time. The Government need to address that. However, when the Prime Minister talked about lifelong learning last week, there were no words of comfort from the Government. What have they done: tripling fees, scrapping maintenance grants and introducing adult learning loans, half of which have been handed back unused to the Treasury.
What we need to know from the Minister—apart from why, curiously, there has been no reference to 16- to 18-education—is what he is going to do to reassure people. Now the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing the debate, which has been wide-ranging and stimulating in a number of ways. Higher education is a complicated policy area, and since I have been appointed to this position I have been inundated with ideas about things to do. In the debate, hon. Members have made contributions where they have not just come up with ideas but thought of knock-on consequences of some policy suggestions. I welcome that.

There were many questions about the Government’s HE review and what it seeks to do, but before I get to that I will deal with some of the myths around the university sector. An important point was made that universities are not just about the education that the individual gets; in many of our towns, universities are huge employers and a source of spreading wealth and growth. For that reason alone, ensuring the sustainability of the sector is particularly important.

This year, we will probably hit the target of one in two 18 to 30-year-olds having a university education. Such an education is not just about what is studied; it has become a rite of passage for many young people. It is the first time they move away from home. They have freedoms, and they become an adult at university. We think that is a positive thing. That aspiration was set by Tony Blair, a Labour Prime Minister, so to hear Labour Members criticising us for hitting a target set by a Labour Prime Minister is a bit rich.

Hon. Members: Who is criticising?

Mr Gyimah: Well, the suggestion from the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), was that somehow we have pursued policies that are damaging higher education and the aspiration and prospects of our young people as far as the university sector is concerned. On the contrary, we have pursued policies that have put no cap on aspiration.

Gordon Marsden rose—

Mr Gyimah: I will take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention in a second.

I will end this myth-busting section by focusing on Scotland, where controls on student numbers continue to restrict the aspiration of young people. The Sutton Trust recently stated that Scottish 18-year-olds from the most advantaged areas are still more than four times more likely to go straight to university than those from the least advantaged areas, compared with 2.4 times in England. Audit Scotland has stated:

“It has become more difficult in recent years for Scottish students to gain a place at a Scottish university as applications have increased more than the number of offers made by universities.”

That is not an example I want to copy here in England.

Carol Monaghan: Of course, as I said, the distinction between FE and HE in Scotland is far more fluid, and UCAS admits that a third of young people studying degree-level courses are doing so in further education colleges, which is not captured by Sutton Trust figures or UCAS figures. Scotland is doing extremely well in this area.

Mr Gyimah: Audit Scotland clearly does not share the hon. Lady’s view.

Gordon Marsden: The Minister speaks about rites of passage. Those are fine words, but fine words butter no parsnips. The truth of the matter is, he should be focusing on not just the number of people from disadvantaged backgrounds getting to university but what stops them staying there. He should also focus on the groups who never even think about getting there because of what his predecessors’ tuition fees policies have done, particularly for mature and part-time students.
Mr Gyimah: In the spirit of compromise, I agree that, yes, access should be not just about getting to university but succeeding when there and getting a well-paid job afterwards. If people do not get to university in the first place, the idea of succeeding when there and getting a well-paid job is purely academic, not to put too fine a point on it. There is clearly work to be done, but where we are now shows significant progress from where we were in 2010.

The review seeks to look at the whole higher education sector for post-18 education, including choice and competition in the market, how the funding system works and how HE and FE can be joined up, and the overlaps. That is particularly important. However, we are not waiting for the review; a significant number of reforms are under way, building on our successes.

We are in the process of implementing the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, and the new Office for Students, at whose launch I will speak later today, will be a strong voice for students and ensure minimum standards. The OFS director for fair access and participation will further drive social mobility. The teaching excellence and student outcomes framework will drive quality teaching—that is particularly important—and the reforms will facilitate further diversity, with new providers and shorter degrees delivered at lower cost. In fact, today my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is publishing the first statement of Government priorities and guidance for the OFS. The Government are also publishing the results of recent consultations on the new regulatory approach, and the OFS is publishing the regulatory framework. That marks a key milestone in delivering our higher education reforms in that area. The review will build on all of that.

There are questions about the teaching grant, which will be looked at in the review, and whether new money will go in. As always, it is important to look at things within the constraints of the Government's overall fiscal framework, and that will be considered alongside budget lines in wider education and our public spending.

There are issues around changing the system completely and whether we look at some kind of graduate contribution or graduate tax system. Obviously, those are all welcome suggestions. I would say they have been looked at by successive Governments over the years, but fresh thinking is welcome, and I welcome the fresh thinking that my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon brought in.

We have a higher education system that is the envy of the world, and many international students are queuing to come and study here, but the Government recognise that to deliver for students more needs to be done. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said that the variability in fees that we expected has not materialised, and it is important to look at all the different ways in which universities operate. There were 534,000 students who accepted a place at university last year. They clearly do not all have the same desires, the same aspirations and the same needs, yet our university system gives all of them pretty much the same offer.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Death by Dangerous Driving: Sentencing

11 am

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered death by dangerous driving and sentencing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and I thank the House of Commons digital team for their support in publicising this debate on social media. They put details of the debate on the House of Commons website, and I understand that 5,500 people saw that post and several hundred engaged with it. From the key themes identified, those who have lost loved ones said that they felt they were serving a life sentence, and they did not feel that the person convicted of causing death by dangerous driving received an adequate sentence.

In support of tougher sentencing, Carole said:

“Definitely. We are now a family living a life sentence. The dangerous driver that caused my 19-year-old son’s death served 22 months and is out living their life.”

Patricia said:

“My 17-year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver. He got two years, four months, while I am doing life. I’m so angry.”

I thank those members of the public who took the time to comment, especially those personally affected by this topic.

In securing this debate I intended to support a campaign initiated recently by the Express and Star, following recent tragic cases in the black country. I therefore make no apology for borrowing from articles that that paper, and others, have published on this subject. The Express and Star’s “Stop the Speeders” campaign has attracted thousands of signatures, and it urges the Government to introduce tougher sentences for killer drivers. I am also extremely grateful for the support of Walsall Labour councillor, Doug James, who has spoken of his support for the campaign.

Support for tougher sentencing is echoed right across the country, and I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay) for his work in this area following a very sad case in his constituency. On 20 February 2011, 22-year-old Jamie Butcher was crossing at a pelican crossing in Wisbech when a speeding driver careened into him, throwing him 43 metres through the air and killing him instantly. He had been walking into town after a family dinner with his parents when the driver, who was travelling at twice the 30 mph speed limit, ran a red light and killed him. The driver was sentenced to just 43 months in prison. Following their son’s death, Steve Green and Tina Butcher joined road safety charity Brake, and campaigned relentlessly for a change in the law. Partly as a result of their hard work, in December 2016 the Government launched a consultation on driving offences and penalties relating to causing death or serious injury.

For the purpose of this debate I would like to draw attention to the summary findings in respect of the penalty for death by dangerous driving. Consultees were asked:

“Do you think that the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving adequately reflects the culpability of the offending behaviour or should it be increased from 14 years’ imprisonment to life?”
Some 70% of the 8,305 respondents to that question thought that the maximum penalty for the offence of causing death by dangerous driving should be increased to 14 years and of those, 15% thought that the current 14 years was adequate. Those who agreed with an increase in the maximum penalty commented that that would provide the courts with tougher sentencing powers in the most serious cases.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that in many of these instances the charge should be manslaughter, not death by dangerous driving? If someone were to kill another person in any other circumstance through dangerous or reckless behaviour, they would be charged with manslaughter, yet it seems that that is not the case on the roads. With a charge of manslaughter the court could give a maximum of life imprisonment rather than 14 years.

Eddie Hughes: I completely concur with my hon. Friend, and I will touch partly on that issue later in my speech.

It was also argued that an increased maximum penalty would better reflect the culpability of dangerous driving behaviours and the disregard that some motorists had for others. A number of respondents also suggested that deliberate driving actions directed at other road users should be charged as murder or manslaughter. Under the current law, the Crown Prosecution Service can, and will, charge a person with manslaughter where the evidence supports that charge. However, as many of those who did not agree with an increase commented, in many driving cases the offending behaviour, which may be highly irresponsible, does not suggest that the vehicle was intentionally used as a weapon to kill or commit grievous bodily harm, so it would not amount to murder or manslaughter.

It was also suggested that causing death by dangerous driving should attract the same sentence as murder or manslaughter because the harm caused—the death of the victim—is the same, regardless of where in the United Kingdom it is committed, and the impact is felt equally.

Some also suggested that consecutive sentences should be imposed for each death caused. It is an established principle of law that sentences are served concurrently when they relate to the same course of events, and consecutively when they relate to separate incidents. The court will impose a sentence length that reflects the seriousness of the offending behaviour. Therefore, in circumstances where multiple deaths were the result of a single incident, concurrent sentences will be imposed by the court, but it will take account of the number of victims when setting the overall length of the sentence.

Where are we today, and why are we still debating this subject in Westminster Hall, rather than the Chamber of the House of Commons? Four months after the publication of the consultation findings, the law remains unchanged and, as of today, no Government time has been allocated to implement those changes. That can be of no comfort to the family of John Hickinbottom, whose killer recently received a seven-year sentence for killing John in Walsall while speeding. The court heard that on Friday 9 June 2017, Craig Edwards got behind the wheel, despite pleas from his mother to hand over the keys to his BMW because he was drunk. He travelled just a quarter of a mile before losing control of the car as it sped at almost twice the 30 mph limit along Bentley Road North in Walsall.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing up this issue for consideration by the House. In Northern Ireland, the reduction of the drink-driving limit has reduced deaths and accidents significantly. Importantly, it has also reduced the police’s workload. Does he agree that liaising with the devolved Administrations to ascertain their direction would be helpful, and that reducing the drink-driving limit to 50 mg in England and on the mainland would be a step in the right direction?

Eddie Hughes: That is an interesting suggestion. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that when he replies to the debate.

Taking a right-hand turn, Craig Edwards careered on to the pavement, hitting Mr Hickinbottom, a retired builder from Bentley, who died three days later last June. Mr Howard Searle, prosecuting, said that Edwards left the wrecked BMW clutching a bottle of Baileys and, when told by an eyewitness that he had knocked down a pedestrian, replied, “So?”

The 29-year-old defendant from Walsall had 15 previous convictions for 34 offences, including two previous cases of dangerous driving. He was jailed for just seven years after admitting causing death by dangerous driving, failing to stop at the scene of an accident, driving when disqualified, drink-driving and having no insurance. He was also banned from driving for four and a half years on release from prison.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. There can be no excuse for the Government not to take the matter forward, because that example clearly shows why this should be treated like manslaughter. That driver’s disgraceful actions merit nothing short of a manslaughter punishment.

Eddie Hughes: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. People need to understand that when they are in control of a vehicle, it is a lethal weapon, and that is manslaughter.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the excellent speech he has delivered so far and the harrowing local cases he has explained. In Scotland over the last five years we have had 166 convictions for death by dangerous driving. However, many of the concerns he has raised in England are also pertinent in Scotland, where there are concerns about the overly lenient sentences. Does he agree that this is an issue that the devolved Administrations must also look at?

Eddie Hughes: I completely agree. The crime is the same, regardless of where in the United Kingdom it is committed, and the impact is felt equally.
[Eddie Hughes]

The time has come. The Government must now make Government time available to implement the change. We must ensure not only that those who kill while speeding face the full force of the law, but that there is a new charge for those who fail to stop at the scene of an accident. On that point, I completely agree with Brake, the road safety charity, which said:

“There needs to be a new charge of ‘failing to stop following a fatal or serious injury crash’. This would not have any requirement to prove the driver who failed to stop caused the crash, as there can be an assumption that if they fled, they caused it. This is necessary because, at present, British law acts as an incentive for the worst law-breaking drivers to flee a crash if they kill someone. If a drink or drug driver kills someone and remains at the scene, they are likely to be tested for alcohol or drugs, prosecuted for ‘causing death by careless driving when under the influence of alcohol or drugs’, and face up to 14 years’ imprisonment. But if they run away and sober up, and there was no other evidence of careless or dangerous driving, they can only be prosecuted for the minor offence of ‘failing to stop or report an accident’, which carries a paltry maximum sentence of six months. If someone steals a car, kills someone and remains at the scene, they will be identified by the police as driving a stolen car. They can be prosecuted for ‘aggravated vehicle taking’ and face a maximum 14 years’ imprisonment. Much better to flee, ditch the car, and hope never to be identified. Drivers who hit and run are despicable: to escape the law, they leave behind suffering and dying victims in need of urgent medical attention. The law must be changed to remove this incentive to flee.”

This Government are on the side of those affected by atrocious crimes of that kind. We sympathise completely with the families of those affected and we understand the need to send a strong message to the public that we will come down hard on those who show total disregard for the lives of others.

I will finish by asking two things of the Minister. First, I ask him to listen to the thousands of people who have already backed the campaign by the Express and Star asking the Government to implement tougher sentences for killer drivers. Secondly, I ask him to listen to the call from Brake, the road safety charity, to create a new offence of failing to stop following a fatal or serious injury crash. Let us work together to ensure that fewer families have to grieve for the loss of loved ones. Let us stop the speeders.

11.13 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart):
It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) for bringing this extremely important debate to the House. I also pay tribute to the work of the Express and Star and to the local Labour councillor, Doug James, who has done an enormous amount of work on the issue.

This issue combines the House across different parties, linking people from Scotland, Northern Ireland and England, and I am sure that colleagues from Wales would be here too, because, as my hon. Friend pointed out in his eloquent speech, this horrifying tragedy is something that does not stop at any national border. He has provided, much more eloquently than I can, a description of what that means for a family. We have seen cases in the last week where dangerous drivers have killed a toddler and a baby in a pram by charging across a road. Those are people whose recklessness with 1.5 tonnes of metal—an incredibly dangerous weapon—is unbelievable. The loss that it means for a family is something unimaginable. The hole it leaves in somebody’s life to have lost a child or a loved one in that way is unbelievable.

That is why we as a Government have committed to increasing the penalty for causing death by dangerous driving to a life sentence, and why we are now working to find time in the legislative agenda to bring that in. That needs to happen, and the fundamental reason for that is that families feel the system is not just. They feel it is not fair to them or to their experience. That has also been brought forward clearly by my hon. Friends the Members for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) and for Moray (Douglas Ross), by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and indeed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who raised it with me yesterday in relation to his constituents.

The one area where the Government would have some disagreement with my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North is on the question of somebody fleeing the scene. There is already an offence for fleeing the scene, and although he pointed out that that in itself is a short offence, it is a very serious aggravating circumstance when the judge comes to convict. We need with the judge to find that somebody had killed someone and then fled the scene, it would significantly increase the sentence that the judge was able to give. Once the opportunity for a maximum life sentence for causing death by dangerous driving is provided, fleeing the scene is an aggravating factor that would drive the sentence up towards a life sentence.

I know that Members of Parliament have challenged that, so I will be clear about what we are talking about. It is of course true that we are dealing with an enormous number of different types of situation. Those situations range all the way from somebody who is drunk, driving at twice the speed limit in a town and speeding through a red light, to my 25-year-old constituent who overtook, sober, at 5 in the afternoon and killed somebody coming the other way because he misjudged his overtaking. All of us in this House understand the importance of the judge and jury in making those difficult decisions in different cases.

We should be in absolutely no doubt about what dangerous driving means. Dangerous driving means that all those people, whatever they were doing, fell well below the standard we would expect of a careful and competent driver. They ought to have been aware of their physical surroundings, aware of the normal laws of causation, aware of the terrible danger posed by the vehicle they were driving, and aware that their dangerousness caused the ultimate thing—a lack of life.

The disagreement over whether that should be a case of murder is around the question of intention. This House believes that there is a difference between somebody who intentionally sets out to murder someone—to stab or shoot them—and somebody who is behaving dangerously in a car, who is overtaking, who may not intend to kill the person. However, the impact on the family is exactly the same; whether the individual intended to kill their family member or accidentally killed their family member, the impact is the same. That is why we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Members of Parliament who have campaigned tirelessly on the issue, which has been neglected by this House. That is also why we will be bringing legislation forward, and why I pay tribute...
again to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North, to the Express and Star, and to all the Members of the House who have campaigned on this important issue.

Gareth Johnson: The Minister is right to point out that there are a range of circumstances. That is why courts should be given lengthy maximum penalties, to cater for the different scenarios that can arise. We have a situation where the maximum penalty for someone charged with causing death by driving without due care and attention and then fleeing the scene is just three years. Worse than that, any unduly lenient sentence cannot even be appealed by the prosecution. Therefore, we need the matter to be reviewed right across the board.

Rory Stewart: The Government's belief is that, by increasing the maximum sentence to a life sentence for causing death in that situation, the distinction my hon. Friend is drawing between different types of crime—in particular, the question of manslaughter that he raised in his intervention earlier—will be dealt with. The maximum penalty of life that the Government will introduce will then allow life sentences to be imposed on an individual who did that, regardless of whether it was done in a car or in some other fashion. With that, I will conclude with another tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North.

Question put and agreed to.

11.19 am
Sitting suspended.
furry at all; they are desired for their high-value body parts. All this stuff raises questions of transnational crime and corruption.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on initiating this crucial debate. Given what she has said about the scale of the illegal wildlife trade and its connection to corruption, will she join me in supporting the Environmental Investigation Agency’s campaign for the UN convention against corruption to be amended to include the illegal wildlife trade? It currently does not, and no cases have been pursued by that agency. That ought to change.

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman, who is well known for his love of animals and has fought for many years on these issues and other environmental matters, makes a very valid point. I do not know in detail the document to which he refers, but it sounds as if a horrible loophole needs to be closed immediately, so I am grateful to him for drawing that to my attention.

I want to address the Government’s slightly lacklustre, “could do better” efforts to date at combating the illegal wildlife trade’s contribution to money laundering and organised crime. I have tabled written questions, as many hon. Members have—a lot of them are here today—and quite often the answer given is that the Government will be hosting a summit in London in October to address these matters, or they state sums of money that have been spent on this issue. To the layperson, a sum of money is a bit intangible. It is a figure; they cannot see what is actually happening. The October summit seems to be the answer to all our ills, but I have a series of questions for the end of my speech about what we need to see from Government at the end of this debate and what we need to see from it in the run-up to the summit.

As my co-chair of the APPG will know, the elephant in the room—ha-ha—on all this and on the anti-corruption strategy, which thankfully has now been published, is the slowness of the UK not just to encourage but to lead the world in the fight against corruption. Does she agree that perhaps the simplest way to look at the question of animal trafficking and poaching is to think of it rather like an extractive industry? Many of the risks that apply to mining or illegal logging and those sorts of thing also apply to the illegal traffic in both flora and fauna. If we think about it in that way, many of the same public policy responses, both in this country and in the countries of origin, will be effective if we can put them in place.

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Criminal intelligence gets more and more complex as criminals find different ways to convert their ill-gotten gains. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the risks are the same, as are the effects of this crime on communities at the other end, which are often in the developed world, so he makes an excellent point.

This trade, if we can call it such, is popular with terrorist groups and militias. That relates to what the Government’s anti-corruption champion just said. The Sudan People’s Liberation Army in South Sudan, which was a rebel group but has now overthrown the person who was in power, has been partial to elephant poaching by grenade; and ivory poaching is a means by which the Janjaweed militia funds its activities in the same region.

The illegal wildlife trade goes much wider than being simply a peripheral concern of well-meaning people concerned with the world that we will leave to the next generation. The damage done is manifold, as the anti-corruption champion just told us. The corruption that supports illegal trading in wildlife poses threats to national security, as we have seen from the terror threat. It is seen by those who deal in it, like guns and drugs, as just another commodity and part and parcel of these organised crime networks. Bribery and corruption obscure the enforcement of existing laws—if there are bendable officials, that also mucks things up—and diminish efforts to strengthen them. Not everyone has an anti-corruption champion in the same way as we do, although the post was vacant for a while; I am very glad that the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) is occupying it now.

Credit where credit is due: the UK has not completely sat on its hands when it comes to anti-corruption efforts. We all remember David Cameron’s anti-corruption summit in May 2016—the whole world came to London. The strategy he promised at the time finally saw the light of day at the end of last year, as did the long awaited anti-corruption champion. It was almost smuggled out in the dead of night and not everyone seems to have noticed. Ultimately, we must do more.

One of my main concerns with the anti-corruption strategy is the lack of strong action on open registers of beneficial ownership in our overseas territories. We have 75 tonnes of elephant ivory exported. It is not just, as one might imagine, one or two elephants being killed by rogue poachers. There is an industrial element to this organised crime—huge-scale shipments to foreign buyers at the other end. People get away with it because, in the words of Tom Cardamone in written testimony to the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, this is “Low Risks, High Profits”.

John Penrose: As one of the chairs of the anti-corruption APPG, the hon. Lady is doing an excellent job in raising the very important nexus between illegal wildlife trading and the fight against corruption. Does she agree that perhaps the simplest way to look at the question of illegal logging and those sorts of thing also apply to the illegal traffic in both flora and fauna. If we think about it in that way, many of the same public policy responses, both in this country and in the countries of origin, will be effective if we can put them in place.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this most important debate. Does she agree that as well as wildlife trafficking, which covers our fauna, there is also the question of flora? Illegal logging is going on. That causes huge economic and environmental damage to an area and, consequently, the flow of that illegal wood into the system causes disparities in economic value.

Dr Huq: I completely agree. Both flora and fauna are handled by the EU body that deals with these things, and there is a worry about whether, when we leave the EU, we will still be covered. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the issue is not just cute, furry animals, scaly animals or whatever. Both fauna and flora are implicated in this vile trade.

The supply chains are complex. There are both poachers and traffickers. The ivory trade alone is estimated by the UN to be worth $62 million in east Asia, with approximately 75 tonnes of elephant ivory exported. It is not just, as one might imagine, one or two elephants being killed by rogue poachers. There is an industrial element to this organised crime—huge-scale shipments to foreign buyers at the other end. People get away with it because, in the words of Tom Cardamone in written testimony to the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, this is “Low Risks, High Profits”.

Dr Huq: I completely agree. Both flora and fauna are handled by the EU body that deals with these things, and there is a worry about whether, when we leave the EU, we will still be covered. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the issue is not just cute, furry animals, scaly animals or whatever. Both fauna and flora are implicated in this vile trade.

The supply chains are complex. There are both poachers and traffickers. The ivory trade alone is estimated by the UN to be worth $62 million in east Asia, with approximately
said that before. The criminal gangs do not simply traffic in animal parts, but in drugs and arms. They launder their money through shell corporations. Again, we are dealing with these secrecy jurisdictions and mysterious properties with questionable ownership. I think there are whole streets in London where we do not know who owns them and dirty money is parked there.

**Nick Herbert** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I strongly support what the hon. Lady is saying about the need for transparency. I agree with her about the transparency of companies, the registers of beneficial ownership in overseas territories and the need for more enforcement. Does she agree that it is vital that we choke off demand for ivory? In the end, as with all crime, if we do not tackle demand, but only focus on enforcement, we will not be successful. It is just as important that we address the demand for ivory, as well as the vital enforcement measures, which I agree are important.

**Dr Huq**: I will come on to speak about demand. I agree that we need to stop these ivory products being desirable, especially in south-east Asia. The right hon. Gentleman made a very good speech the other day in the debate on the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, with which I agreed wholeheartedly. He has also noticed that the Government seem to have downgraded their ambition. In 2016, we were told that all countries needed to reach a gold standard of public registers of beneficial interest. David Cameron painted himself as a world leader in this and promised action. Now, the Foreign Office says that it expects UK tax havens only to adopt the public register when it becomes a global standard, so I think there has been a bit of slippage, but I know that the right hon. Gentleman has done excellent work on this. He is absolutely right that these products should not be desirable at all and people should not be clamouring for them.

The conservation community should be encouraged to work alongside anti-corruption organisations in bringing together anti-corruption strategy and environmental policy. We have an environment Minister responding today, but in a way this covers more than one Department. It is a multifarious issue.

It was good that a much-trailed document recently saw the light of day: the 25-year environment plan. That came out earlier this year and it includes a pledge that only 3% to 5% of income from commercial hunting goes to local communities. The rest goes into central Government, agencies, international corporations, terrorists and all sorts of other destinations.

The consultation on the ivory ban last autumn was very welcome, but it has all gone a bit quiet since it closed last year. We are already in March, so when will the results surface? The ban needs to be more than just virtue signalling. There need to be proper measures for combating the ivory trade at source.

**Zac Goldsmith**: I just want to make one point and follow it up with a question. Since the summit initiated by David Cameron, there has been huge progress. Only a few weeks ago, China closed down every one of its ivory carving factories, which will have a huge impact in reducing demand in China. There have been all kinds of ripple effects across the world as a consequence of that early summit. Demand is being tackled at a very high level. As a country, we can take a lot of credit for that. Everyone expects that the consultation will result in a pretty clear position by this Government—the position that most people want the Government to take. The one concern I have is that it will not go far enough in terms of species. It is not just about elephant ivory. If the elephant ivory market is closed down, there will be a move—we are already seeing signs of this—towards other ivory-bearing species, such as the walrus, the narwhal, what other species?

**Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): Rhinos.

**Zac Goldsmith**: Rhinos do not produce ivory. There are other ivory-bearing species. Therefore my hope—I hope the Minister will acknowledge this later—is that the ban will be on not just elephant ivory, but all ivory.

**Dr Huq**: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. China has introduced a total ban. That is what we would like from our Government. It is not often that we are following China. Usually we are leadership and not followership. He is absolutely right that this concerns other species as well. I think the famous chess set that people talk about came from walrus tusks, so it is not only elephants. I feel there has been a slowing in some of those laudable aims, perhaps because the bandwidth of the Government is being reduced by other issues—nobody foresaw Brexit at the time of that first anti-corruption summit. We can go further and faster.

**Zac Goldsmith**: I thought of the third species: the hippo. There are only 100,000 hippos in the world, which is extraordinary. If there is any increase in demand for hippo ivory as a replacement for elephant ivory, they are finished. I wanted to put the lovely, noble hippo on the record as well.

**Dr Huq**: Is the song about hippos “Mud, Mud, Glorious Mud”, or am I misremembering that from my long-ago youth? Yes, the hippos are a valiant species.

We are one of the largest countries to export ivory to south-east Asia. As the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said, this can create desire and demand for people to own these products as things with a luxury status. We need to work with China

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): A tiger never changes his stripes.

**Dr Huq**: Right, let us stick to the point. To stamp out poaching would cut off the source, which we need to do so that animal carcasses are not exported at all, let alone the body parts. We have spoken about the products at the other end. I think there are some studies that show that only 3% to 5% of income from commercial hunting goes to local communities. The rest goes into central
and other south-east Asian Governments to ensure that demand is dampened and even destroyed, and that ivory’s cultural cachet—that it is a cool thing to have—falls.

In this post-referendum situation, we head towards Brexit. There is a potential opportunity to promote other British luxury goods as alternatives to ivory in this brave new world we are heading to, which not all of us wanted to go to. I want to put on record the work done by my constituent Duncan McNair of Save the Asian Elephants—he deserves praise. Perhaps the Minister would like to meet him because he has some good ideas. Although in 1975 the Asian elephant in theory became a protected species, abuses continue to this day—he can talk ad infinitum about those.

The black rhinoceros—yes, the rhino was there—is in danger of being hunted to extinction in the wild, as an hon. Member mentioned. The organised poaching gangs associated with it promote corruption and organised crime. The rhino horn shipped to Asia from Africa is often sold for more than gold and platinum on the black market. The UN figures put the annual trade in Asia at £8 million. Lion numbers declined by 43% between 1993 and 2014. As of July 2017, the continental population of African lions was estimated to be 20,000. All these wonderful species are disappearing from our planet. Across their range, lions are in decline. They face threats from loss of habitat and prey, as well as illegal poaching and hunting. Lion bones, as well as those of leopards and other big cats, are used in some east Asian medicine—there is a myth that they have medicinal properties.

There have been success stories in the fight against the organised illegal wildlife trade. Lion hunting trophies are no longer permitted in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania and Somalia. It is not all doom and gloom. The Kenya Wildlife Service has been praised by the UN and the coalition Government because it introduced a £10 million grant to combat the trade in ivory and rhino horn. This debate was not meant to be about simply knocking the Government, but I do want to outline some areas where we could do better.

Some other good news is that, in 2017, a Chinese trader in Nanjing was arrested for what he believed to be tiger bone, but was in fact a lion bone. That illustrates how criminal gangs can use lion bones to skirt restrictions on tiger bones—there is slippage. There is a sense that the commercial farming of lions and tigers in South Africa could be fuelling rather than satiating demand for big cat bones in traditional medicines.

Clearly, aspects of the illegal wildlife trade exist in tandem with elements of legalised trade in wildlife parks. Again, the case of Cecil the lion was in a wildlife park. The Environmental Investigation Agency found that legal loopholes allowing the hunting of rhinos for live export and for trophies were being used to facilitate poaching. There is an argument in some circles for the promotion of farming certain animals to combat the illegal trade in their body parts, but some evidence shows that far from combatting the trade, it fuels demand. Again, there is that question of supply and demand.

On page 62 of the strategy, there is an eye-catching box with a border, which features discussion of the UK’s efforts to tackle the international wildlife trade. It includes references to the international meeting in October, which we are all looking forward to, sharing expertise with Vietnamese customs authorities, co-operation between Chinese and African forces and supporting follow-ups in Botswana. The message is that progress is being made, but it does not offer any concrete examples of policies or initiatives.

Nigel Mills: I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Does she at least recognise that the strategy, perhaps as a surprise to many, made such a prominent link between corruption and illegal wildlife sales, which reinforces the need to build capacity in countries around the world so that people cannot pay a bribe to find out where an animal is, get the body out of the country or move money around, which is an important part of tackling the problem?

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman, my trusty co-chair, is absolutely right. There needs to be expertise to enforce all those things—having policies is not enough. We hear about bent policemen. I do not know whether other Members were there, but just now the International Fund for Animal Welfare was in the building with a photo opportunity about ivory. The policy adviser, David, told me about a recent case in which eight policemen were heavily implicated. The hon. Gentleman is right that we need the crime-fighting mechanics as well as policies.

The charity was demonstrating a fingerprinting kit, because ivory is one of the few things that fingerprints do not leave any trace on. That cutting-edge technology can now be used 28 days after the prints were left. This is a cross-border trade where an animal is killed in one place, and the parts are exported and moved between places, but the technology will allow a month for prints to be taken. I am very encouraged by the IFAW’s work, but we need to encourage more counties to take up that fingerprinting technology and introduce it in other police forces—it was developed by University College London and the standard is used by our police.

The first question on my list for the Minister is easy and I have already said it: will she meet with Duncan McNair, the CEO of STAE, to discuss its work and how it can have an input into Government policy? He has some very good ideas. I have also mentioned last autumn’s ivory ban. We have not seen the results yet, and there are suspicions that they could be held back for a wonderful photo opportunity in October at the international conference here in London. I hope that she will tell me that is not case and we will see the consultation results sooner. Could she tell us when the consultation results will be released?

The strategy mentions “tangible outcomes for implementation and delivery” by October, but delivery of what? In fact, will the ivory ban be in place by then? That would be a great opportunity for that announcement, although it would be even better if the ban has long been in place.

Of the exemptions announced by the Government to a total ivory ban, I completely accept, as does the Musicians’ Union, the exemption for musical instruments—violins and cellos. I am not going to burst into Stevie Wonder and Paul McCartney’s “Ebony and Ivory” at this point.
Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): May I help the hon. Lady with that list? Some very valuable bagpipes have ivory mountings on them. In fact, as a piper, I possess such an instrument. It is beautiful, but regrettably ivory is involved.

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman’s skills never fail to impress me—they are increasing by the minute. Perhaps he can play the bagpipes for us at a function at some point—he could do it at the unveiling of the total ivory ban and the delivery of these promises well before 25 years’ time. Yes, bagpipes use ivory. Other songs have occurred to me: “Karma Chameleon”, which is from a similar era—I think that there is about a year or two between the two songs—and “I Am the Walrus”, which is a perennial favourite of many. I accept the musical exemption.

I accept the exemption for anything that is under 5% ivory or 200 grams because those are such tiny amounts, and the exemption for museums. Slightly more troubling is the Department for International Development’s long-term “culturally artistic and historic” pieces. That could open up a legal loophole for carved, solid, luxury ivory items such as Japanese fans or cigar boxes. We need to ensure that they are not covered. What is the exact test of “culturally artistic and historic”? The Lewis chess set of 1100 AD is often mentioned, although it is actually walrus ivory, not elephant ivory. It is often said that is the kind of thing the term will cover, but what about injecting certainty with the proviso that, if it can be sold to a museum, it is allowable? It may not necessarily be in a museum, but if it is a museum-able piece, we can allow it. If it is a cigar box, it will not be covered—no thanks.

Another area where we could go further regarding the illegal wildlife trade is the lack of funding for mapping trade routes used by criminal gangs to transport animal products and carcasses across continents. A glance at the UK aid development tracker shows that various Departments and agencies are involved in combating the trade: the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for International Development and the Department for International Trade. There is a worry that things might fall through the cracks if we are not well defined. Could the UK Government send a strong message by enacting the total ban on the import of lion trophies? The numbers are not large, so hopefully this is not on an industrial scale, but the Government could seize the initiative and show leadership.

I have a couple more questions, and then I will end. Will the Minister confirm what “stringent tests” have been met by the lion countries? That was in a 2015 written answer from the then Minister responsible, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). There is a worry that things might fall through the cracks if they are not well defined. Could the UK Government send a strong message by enacting the total ban on the import of lion trophies? The numbers are not large, so hopefully this is not on an industrial scale, but the Government could seize the initiative and show leadership.

I have a couple more questions. Given that the academic literature identifies mapping transnational crimes, why does the Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund fund only one proposal that maps transnational networks? That relates to my earlier question. I have already raised another obvious question: when will the Government ensure that public registers of beneficial interests are in place for the overseas territories, so that they can better fight this type of crime?

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman’s skills never fail to impress me—they are increasing by the minute. Perhaps he can play the bagpipes for us at a function at some point—he could do it at the unveiling of the total ivory ban and the delivery of these promises well before 25 years’ time. Yes, bagpipes use ivory. Other songs have occurred to me: “Karma Chameleon”, which is from a similar era—I think that there is about a year or two between the two songs—and “I Am the Walrus”, which is a perennial favourite of many. I accept the musical exemption.

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Dr Huq: Is the ivory in the bagpipes a small percentage, and are they historical? It has just occurred to me that if they can be manufactured without ivory now, and they are a 99%-ivory product, I do not agree. I did not make that clear.

Stephen Kerr: I will gratefully clarify that ivory is not now used in bagpipes. These are very old sets of bagpipes. I have a set that my father bought for me when I was 12. He paid an incredibly small amount of money for them, and they are now worth a lot more.

Zac Goldsmith: They won't be for long.

Stephen Kerr: Point taken.

The hon. Lady made the interesting point, with which I agree, that the Government have not exactly sat on their hands but that, ultimately, we must do more—and more than virtue signalling. As the new Member of Parliament for Stirling, one of the first places I was invited to visit was one of the top tourist attractions in my constituency, the Blair Drummond safari park. Jamie Muir and his team gave me a behind-the-scenes experience that, frankly, I would never have had if I had not been elected. I had up-close encounters with elephants, rhinos, hippos and giraffes, and it was glorious to come into such close contact with those beautiful animals. Appreciating the glory of nature makes us appreciate our own humanity. It is appropriate to talk about nature on a day when Scotland received its first ever red weather alert. We stand in awe of the power of nature, as well as its beauty.

I promise that I will make only a short contribution, but I should explain that I am speaking in this debate because of my constituents. Like me, they feel very strongly about the need for us to proactively preserve the wonders of the world we live in and to not stand idly by and, frankly, see them ruthlessly destroyed for ill-gotten gains—that does not even begin to describe the depth of cruelty that goes into this trade.

The Government have a strong record on improving animal welfare, and it is important that we not only protect animals in the United Kingdom, but work to promote animal welfare and good environmental stewardship worldwide. That involves tackling the illegal wildlife trade and the corruption that it propagates and relies on.

It is shocking that the illegal wildlife trade stands alongside human trafficking and the trafficking in drugs and arms as one of the major cross-border crimes of our time, and that it draws in as much as £17 billion per year. That only underlines the need for global action and global co-operation.

It is a trade that brutalises animals. Those criminals routinely mistreat them, transport them from country to country in absolute squalor and kill them in massive numbers—that is great cruelty. The amount of ivory being caught in large shipments alone indicates that perhaps thousands of elephants are being killed each year for their ivory. African elephants are, of course, endangered, and the trade helps to drive them towards extinction by hindering global conservation efforts. Those criminals have no regard for the environment and will destroy entire ecosystems for short-term gains.

In addition to the cost to animals and to the environment, the illegal wildlife trade has a human cost. The trade thrives on and exacerbates corruption and undermines the rule of law. It is an entire industry—and a lucrative one, as we heard from the figures quoted by the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton—that operates outwith the authority of any Government or the law. Ultimately, it is an insidious, destabilising force that holds back the growth of developing countries and helps to keep millions of people in poverty worldwide.

Zac Goldsmith: My hon. Friend is making a powerful and moving speech. It is known that Janjaweed, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance army and other organisations all derive much of their income from the illegal wildlife trade, which makes it a dangerous and ugly business. Does he agree that one of things we do well, and have done well, as a country is provide real training for people in countries that want to tackle the trade to ensure that their anti-poaching and anti-illegal wildlife trade units are up to the task? We need to see much more of that as part of our “global Britain” plans in years to come.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention and completely agree with him. That is one aspect of our leadership in this area that we should definitely advance. It is highly effective.

For humans, animals and the wider environment, it is imperative that we stamp out this illegal trade. The Government have rightly noted that it will require concerted international action and co-operation with nations across the world to bring the trade crashing down. It is in every country’s interest to end the illegal wildlife trade. Cracking down on it will promote sustainable growth and stability and help to preserve the future of the environment. I am grateful that the Government have set to work on addressing the issue and, as they have frequently expressed it in recent times, are devoid of any complacency in this area.

In 2014, the UK hosted an international meeting, as has been mentioned, where 40 countries agreed urgent co-ordinated action to eliminate the trade. Since then the Government have worked with authorities in China, Vietnam and across Africa, to name but a few, to help to curb the trade. International organisations play an important role too, and our support for the International Consortium for Combating Wildlife Crime, which brings together a range of institutions, makes a valuable contribution to the global fight against the trade. I welcome the publication of the new cross-Government anti-corruption strategy in December, which lays out the blueprint for further action, including against the illegal wildlife trade.

The strategy recognises the many ways in which we can work to curb the trade, including by promoting more robust law enforcement and stronger legal frameworks, encouraging alternative livelihoods and economic opportunities for people who might otherwise be tempted by the lucrative nature of the trade, and simply raising awareness. Likewise, it recognises the importance of international organisations to our future efforts. The UN, our Commonwealth friends and allies and the G20 will all be valuable partners in working to take down this trade and the corruption with which it is so intertwined.
At this point the strategy fills me with confidence that the Government will continue to strive to be a world leader in the fight against the illegal wildlife trade, but it has to be more than virtue signalling. There has to be real action. We already have a strong record—we certainly have a strong catalogue of speeches—in this area, and the strategy needs to develop. I believe we are ready to build on it as all parties in the House of Commons have an appetite for it.

I mentioned earlier that we are eighth out of 180 countries in the world for anti-corruption. I think we can do better in that area as well. Just as we should promote animal welfare around the world, we should also promote our culture of anti-corruption. As one of the least corrupt nations on earth—thankfully—it is our responsibility to help to build a world free of criminal enterprises, such as the illegal wildlife trade, where corruption touches as few lives as possible. With this strategy, I have confidence that the Government will proceed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Before I call Vernon Coaker, I must advise that I will call the Front Benchers at 3.35 pm, so please share the time between you if I call you to speak.

3.13 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing this important debate. I do not want to speak for long, but I felt it was important to make a short contribution to the debate. To be frank, I felt somewhat guilty that I have not spoken much on this issue in my time in Parliament. Like many people, over the past year or two I have been moved by some of the things that I have seen on television and by things that I have read. I have been moved by the devastating figures that have started to emerge, thanks to the work of people such as my hon. Friend and others in the Chamber, and by organisations outside this House, some of whom are with us today.

The world—and ourselves, as a developed nation and a Parliament—is at a crossroads. It is not that the Government are not doing anything and do not care; that would clearly be ridiculous and not true. We do care, and so do a significant number of people across the world. The criminal gangs represent a very small minority, but unless we tackle them and work with other countries with a greater sense of urgency—so that the issue becomes a greater priority for our country, for the various international organisations, for the EU, for the various policing bodies, for the United Nations and for the Organisation of Africa Unity, and so on—our grandchildren will not see a wild elephant, rhinoceros or tiger. That is the starting point—the thing that wakes each of us up, to say, “We will not stand for this any longer.” Although we cannot wave a magic wand, we want to be able to say to our grandchildren that we did everything we possibly could. At the moment, I do not think I could say that. I will let others judge whether they could, but I could not. That is why I wanted to speak in this debate.

I do not want the Government to get defensive about this, but they could do more simply by saying, “We are going to put a new shirt on, dust ourselves down, see what the laws are, bang the desk and demand that we get better action”—from ourselves, but also from the police and the international organisations that we belong to. If that happened, it would not stop these things happening. It does not matter which party is in power; it happens, and it carries on happening. The same can be said about the international bodies we belong to.

Billions of pounds are made. The figures produced by various people are shocking. When we see the pictures it brings tears to our eyes, but crying about it does not save a single elephant, rhinoceros or tiger. That is simply the starting point—the thing that wakes each of us up, to say, “We will not stand for this any longer.” Although we cannot wave a magic wand, we want to be able to say to our grandchildren that we did everything we possibly could. At the moment, I do not think I could say that. I will let others judge whether they could, but I could not. That is why I wanted to speak in this debate.

Can we not accelerate things a bit? Do we really want to come back here in a year, or two or three, and say, “There are still elephants being poached for their ivory”? That was the plea of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton and the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). Whatever the difficulties, the consultation has finished. I accept that it will not be easy, given the exemptions that will have to be made; but for goodness’ sake, we have been talking about an ivory ban for years. Can we not just get on with it somehow?

Other people know far more than I do about the laws and the difficulties—some will have had to go and witness them. I came here to say this to the Government. I know they want to do as much as they can, and they are doing so. That is true of us all. But let us not be the Parliament, or the Members, or the legislators who had to tell their grandchildren, “We’re sorry that those great wild animals no longer exist. We wanted to do more, but it was difficult to get people to work together, and the exemptions were difficult.” Whatever the problems and difficulties, we owe it to our children and grandchildren, ourselves and the planet, to do better. That is the task before us.
3.21 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It thank the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) for introducing the debate.

The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) issued a challenge to the House to hold wildlife in trust for those who come after us. We all have that challenge in our hearts. We must try to do it. I recently saw a video making the rounds on social media of a baby rhino in South Africa lying by the side of its dead mother, seemingly crying—it looked like that on the video. Such things are an unfortunate reality in the world we live in, but what caused that death should not be. The mother’s horns had been ripped from her body. Stats sometimes bring things home to us, because they show the enormous scale of what is happening. Rhino poaching has increased between 2007 and 2013 by 7,700% from 13 per year to 1,004 per year. That is incredible. The significance and magnitude of the figures cannot be stressed enough.

I was interested to hear about the hidden talents of the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on the bagpipes. I would not have known. I am fond of the bagpipes. Perhaps one day I will have the hon. Gentleman over to entertain us—12 July would be the day to come, but that is by the way.

The illegal wildlife trade is worth more than £15 billion a year. It is the fourth most lucrative illicit trade in the world after drugs, weapons and human trafficking. The very thought makes me ill. I have had a surprising number of emails from constituents about the debate. The more I have looked into the facts and figures, the more I have seen that, while we clearly have taken steps, we are not doing enough. We should be stepping out on the world stage, playing a greater role on behalf of those who could help, and bringing about the end of a vile trade.

I firmly concur with the aims and goals of the Worldwide Fund for Nature with respect to the end of illegal trade in animals: we must be clear, first, about adopting “zero tolerance policy on corruption associated with the illegal wildlife trade, recognising with great concern that corruption is an important factor facilitating the criminal activities associated with the illegal wildlife trade.”

Secondly, we must urge countries where poaching, trafficking and buying take place to commit to supporting strategies that deepen understanding of corruption risks, and mitigation strategies to address the corruption that makes the illegal wildlife trade possible. We must review progress on existing high-level commitments such as those made in the London declaration of 2014 and the Kasane statement of 2015. We have made lots of statements and verbal commitments, but we need something that stops what is happening. We need to address the problem of corruption facilitating wildlife trafficking and related offences by reviewing or amending legislation as necessary, and criminalising the corruption that facilitates the trade. We should strengthen the legal framework and facilitate law enforcement to combat the illegal wildlife trade and assist with prosecution and the imposition of penalties that are an effective deterrent.

The illegal wildlife trade is made possible by corruption, and it fuels further corruption. Only if we tackle corruption can we eliminate the trade. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) in an intervention mentioned steps taken by China, which I hope make a difference. China sometimes says it will do something, but ivory trading seems to continue. Let us see how that works. Corruption can take place at every stage of the chain—poaching, trafficking, trading and laundering of the illegal proceeds of crime. It can be at the highest level, sanctioned for individual gain.

I had the pleasure of going on a half-day on safari in Kenya, with the armed forces parliamentary scheme. It was an opportunity for me to watch some of the creatures that God created. They must have been looking at me, as I had a white shirt on—as all the things to wear on safari. They must have been looking at me. God, who made wonders for our enjoyment—certainly not for our abuse or for the illegal animal trade. That is an abuse of God’s creation. Lions are being hunted for the thrill of the ride and as a trophy, and elephants for their ivory, with more than 100,000 killed by poachers between 2010 and 2012. Twenty thousand elephants are killed every year for the illegal ivory trade. The numbers suggest that, in the two months since the closure of the consultation at the end of December, approximately 8,300 elephants have been slaughtered, not for meat or to feed starving families, but to decorate people’s houses with ivory. That is not acceptable.

As hon. Members have said, we need to stifle the demand and end corruption and illegal killing. What help can the Minister give to countries that are trying to stop illegal poaching? The training and equipping of rangers is perhaps the sort of help needed on the ground.

Zac Goldsmith: A staggering quantity of illegal wildlife trade happens online, so one way to deal with demand would be to tackle that trade online. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in paying tribute and offering huge thanks to organisations such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare that have done so much to persuade big online retailers to weed illegal wildlife trade out of the way they do business? Taobao, Alibaba and eBay have massively changed their policies as a consequence of campaigning by groups such as IFAW. We all owe them a debt of gratitude.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman has made a number of long interventions and there is one more speech to go.

Jim Shannon: It is my belief that we need to introduce legislation quickly to play our part in reducing the number of animals killed by poachers, and ensuring that narwhal, walrus and hippopotamus ivory will not be used as replacements so that those animals become next in the firing line. We must end the trade. We can up our game and do a better job of playing our part. That can begin today, with this debate. Let us set the scene. I ask the Minister and her Department to take heed and urgently implement the steps to legislation.

3.28 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member
for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing the debate. There have been some fine speeches, but that of my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) was particularly moving. I have been involved in the debate for a long time and have sponsored events at Parliament to draw attention to the issue. The very fact that an ex-Home Office Minister, who is a senior and respected Member of Parliament, has taken the time to show how engaged he now feels in the debate is an indication of how much movement is being made. We are now at the point at which this controversy and scandal must be addressed seriously, both nationally and internationally.

I will not go through the numbers and facts behind the size of the trade—we have heard them many times today—but suffice it to say that we still do not fully understand the full relationship between this form of organised crime and other forms, including drugs, and the way it helps to underpin international terrorism. Our attention to animal welfare and protecting the elephant and rhino, and all those other species, is often justified because of organised crime, and we have now reached a point where that is fully understood. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling brought us back to the important point: this is also about protecting some very precious and important species.

Let me provide a little detail on the issues involved. We know that there is still a great deal of work to do in the countries where poaching takes place, and there is an absence of or inadequacy of measures to track performance on stopping poaching in the first place. Officials and employees are badly paid, and in some cases rangers provide information on patrols or the location of animals. On occasion they turn a blind eye to poaching. We also know that we get false documentation in the trading environment, and that a blind eye is turned to checks and inspections at borders. That is all underpinned by corruption, which illustrates the scale of the challenge.

I pay tribute to those NGOs that have worked so hard on this for many years, in particular the WWF and IFAW. They are clear about what is needed at the conference in London later this year: we want, and need, a zero-tolerance policy on corruption. The UK has a lot of soft power on this issue, and we must go out and urge those countries where poaching, trafficking and buying takes place to continue to support strategies that deepen an understanding of the risk of corruption. Mitigation strategies may also be required to address the corruption that enables that illegal trade. As an important international power—even now—we are in a position to help and support those countries.

We must strengthen the legal framework and facilitate law enforcement for illegal wildlife trade. At the event I sponsored about three years ago, Interpol was in the room. Will the Minister say to what extent we are still engaged in such international co-operation? Can she guarantee—I am sorry to bring this into the debate; I do not want to, but I have to—that post Brexit we will still have that international co-operation, particularly with Interpol and European crime agencies, to ensure that we continue to tackle the issue successfully?

Finally, I want to mention the ban. The consultation finished at the end of the year, and I have attended meetings on this issue. What I really want to hear from the Minister is when we will get detail about the outcome of the consultation. The point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling was absolutely right: now is the time to take action, so the sooner we hear from the Minister, the better. I understand the need for exemptions, and the point raised by the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) about musical instruments was well made. I also accept the need to get those exemptions absolutely right for the antiques trade. That will not be easy, but if we do get it right, we will gain the co-operation of that market. That will make it a lot easier for us, as a major international power, to demonstrate not only that we are legislating to do our bit to stop the illegal trade—perhaps by banning the domestic trade in antique ivory, with exemptions—but that we also have the full co-operation of those involved in that market. I will finish on that important point.

3.35 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing this debate.

I am grateful for the opportunity to sum up on behalf of the Scottish National party. It has been fairly consensual—I have taken part in debates in Westminster Hall since I was elected in June, and this has been one of the best. We heard an excellent speech from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who told us of his talent in playing the bagpipes. He spoke of his trip to Blair Drummond and about being up close to those rare animals. As a nationalist Member of Parliament from Glasgow, being here with Conservative MPs feels much the same, but in all seriousness he made an excellent speech.

The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made one of the most moving speeches that I have heard in my time in this House [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] It was very sincere, and as the father of a young child it struck a chord with me to think that my son, who is two years old, will one day grow up. There is an expectation and onus on us as legislators and politicians to make sure that we show leadership. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to listen to the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was typically gracious in reducing his speaking time to allow other hon. Members to speak, and he hammered home the statistics. That 7,700% increase in rhino poaching, which I think was in the Library briefing from an exchange I had with the Foreign Secretary, reminds us that this is very serious. The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) has been a Member of the House a lot longer than I have, and has put a lot of effort into this work. She was right to pay tribute to IFAW and the WWF, and made a point about our use of soft power, for which I was grateful.

The SNP welcomes recent UK and global commitments to tackle the international ivory trade, and we hope for continued progress from the UK Government in contributing to the end of that trade. I was encouraged by the Prime Minister’s press statement after her visit to China earlier this month, and I hope the Government will respond accordingly to the DEFRA consultation. The huge public response—something like 77,000 people took part—shows that people in the UK want action, which has been demonstrated by the cross-party consensus in the Chamber.
3.40 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your firm but fair chairmanship, Ms Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on her speech, which was a tour de force. I will not need to go over all the issues again, because she has covered them all.

This has been an important and thoughtful debate. I thank all hon. Members who spoke in it—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton, but also my hon. Friends the Members for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who all made valuable contributions. The debate’s importance was demonstrated by the rapid and regular interventions from the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), the hon. Members for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) and for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), and my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield).

I will concentrate on the London conference, because it is something that we can contribute positively to today, but first let me make two quick observations. First, given how terrorist groups use the illegal wildlife trade to finance their activities, we need to make it clear that it is no less of a priority for us than the drugs trade or human trafficking. It is a multi-billion-pound exercise, from which many such organisations derive most of their income; we need to understand that when we consider Interpol and other matters. I will say in passing that if I manage to get into South Sudan later this year, I will have a word with the SPLA-SPLM about what they are doing to ensure that they legitimise their activities rather than drawing any money from this nefarious activity. Secondly, I do not understand how we can allow anyone in this country who goes trophy-hunting to come back with anything other than a potential prison sentence hanging over them. We need to be much firmer on that.

I have some questions about the London conference in October that the Minister may wish to take away—I do not expect her to answer them all now. I hope that at the conference we will establish a very strong legal framework against corruption and wildlife trafficking. That will be the bottom line. There are already several international laws, but we need to make them much more overt and much stronger. We need to recognise the importance of capacity-building and ensure that customs officials have discretionary powers to interdict and draw attention to what is happening in their countries. I hope we will support the World Customs Organisation’s important project GAPIN—Great Apes and Integrity—to enhance integrity in 15 African nations, because the role of Africa must not be underestimated.

We should also strengthen our international development support for enforcement, for shutting down chains, for helping frontline and subsequent investigations and for the operation of customs. We need a holistic approach; I hope that that will come out of the conference. It is no good pretending that we can address what is happening throughout the world unless we ensure we are doing all we can—whether through an ivory ban or through other measures—to stop the worst aspects of the trade affecting what happens in this country.

My penultimate point is that we need to look at import and export licences to ensure that what people bring into the country is what they say it is. We need to take a stronger approach, and we should encourage other countries to do so too.

Finally, I ask the Minister what particular action we are taking to help NGOs to ensure that they tackle the corruption and illegality associated with this terrible trade, because so much of the activity of the Department for International Development happens through the NGO community. We need to protect whistleblowers. So much of what we find out comes from people who have bravely put their head on the line and taken the risk of saying what is going on, so we must protect those people in their countries. I hope the Government will bring that up at the conference.
The conference will be very important, and it needs to be given much more attention. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling says, this is the end—if we do not get this right now, not many of these species will be left and we will not have done the anti-poverty work that is needed. We have to give people alternatives, because we cannot pretend that we can shut the trade down without giving people a quality of life that allows them to stop what they are doing. That is why the conference is so essential. I wish the Minister well. I do not know whether she will speak at the conference, but as we are hosting it, I hope she will send a high-level deputation to ensure that the British Government do their bit and that we get something concrete out of it.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): If the Minister needs time to answer the questions that have been raised, I am mindful—given the length of the initial speech—to leave all the remaining time to her.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Thank you, Mrs Moon; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing this important debate on the anti-corruption strategy and the illegal wildlife trade. I welcome the debate, which is timely because we are preparing for the illegal wildlife trade conference in London in October, as the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) pointed out.

The UK Government’s anti-corruption strategy was published in December. It provides an ambitious framework for tackling corruption to 2022 and includes significant international and domestic commitments. The strategy describes the illegal wildlife trade as the fourth most lucrative trans-boundary crime, with an estimated value of up to £17 billion a year. We recognise that it damages economic growth and undermines state institutions and the rule of law. It relies on and exacerbates corruption, cultivating discontent and undermining security. Seizures of illegally traded species have been recorded in 120 countries and include approximately 7,000 species.

I am very conscious that the illegal wildlife trade threatens some of the world’s most iconic species, such as elephants and rhinos, with extinction, but it is not just those majestic animals that are threatened; birds, flora and invertebrates are also among the thousands of species at risk from illegal trade. For example, tropical hardwoods are illegally felled and shipped around the world, with impacts on forest fauna, water quality, medicines and building materials for local people.

CITES—the convention on international trade in endangered species of wild fauna and flora—protects more than 35,000 species. The UK is fully committed to its obligations under CITES to act against unsustainable trade that threatens the survival of species in the wild. We are pressing ahead with activities inspired by the aims of CITES to ensure the sustainability of legal trade in wild flora and fauna and to protect species ranging from lions and goshawks to cacti, coral and rare orchids.

The UK chairs the CITES working group on proposals to combat illegal killing and trafficking of rhinos. We take an active role in the implementation and development of CITES controls and are actively involved in working groups on species ranging from great apes to sharks.

Our aim is to ensure that the international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

International trade in hunting trophies is controlled under CITES. Although there are examples of negative effects from big game hunting caused by poor or inappropriate management, scientific evidence shows that in certain limited and rigorously controlled cases, trophy and big game hunting can be an effective conservation tool, supporting local livelihoods and attracting revenue for other conservation activities. That was confirmed in the report that was prepared for the Government by Oxford University. That said, we will continue to look very carefully at big game imports, to ensure that they do not impact on the sustainability of endangered species in the country of origin.

The UK anti-corruption strategy recognises that countering the illegal wildlife trade requires concerted multilateral action to raise awareness, eradicate markets, strengthen legal frameworks, strengthen law enforcement and—critically—promote alternative livelihoods. While I in no way excuse such activity, if somebody can earn in one night what it would otherwise take them five years to earn, one might understand why people commit these crimes. However, there is no excuse for doing so. We are working with global partners, including the G20 and UN, to achieve the aims that I have outlined.

Progress is being made. UN resolutions, co-sponsored by the UK, recognise the links between IWT and corruption. In 2015, the UN General Assembly called upon member states for the first time “to prohibit, prevent and counter any form of corruption that facilitates illicit trafficking in wildlife and wildlife products.” Last year the UK worked successfully with Germany’s G20 presidency to agree high-level principles on combating corruption related to the illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products.

The UK has shown global leadership in tackling IWT, and I thank right hon. Members and hon. Members for their generous comments about that. We hosted the first, groundbreaking London conference in 2014, which secured ambitious agreements from more than 40 Governments to take urgent, co-ordinated action and was hailed as a turning point in global efforts to tackle these damaging activities. We also played a leading role in the subsequent conferences in Botswana and Vietnam.

Previous conferences have achieved an international consensus against IWT, but we recognise that there is more to do. The levels of poaching of many species remain unsustainably high and, as has already been pointed out, organised criminal networks continue to benefit from the proceeds of IWT. That is why urgent, united action by the international community remains vital.

Our work on IWT fits within the four strategic pillars that were agreed at the first conference in London in 2014: eradicating the market for illegal wildlife products; ensuring effective legal frameworks and deterrent strengthening law enforcement; and providing sustainable livelihoods and economic development. These four pillars are well established and are used globally to focus on IWT.

To help to reaffirm political commitment, we are bringing global leaders back to London this October for another conference. I understand that the invitations...
have gone out and we want to welcome people from around the world, so that we can come together to focus on tangible outcomes for delivery. In particular, we intend to focus on law enforcement and tackling the corruption that facilitates IWT. The conference will recognise IWT as a serious organised crime that affects people as well as animals, and it will harness the power of the private sector, non-government organisations, academia and technology to strengthen global action.

To support our global leadership on tackling IWT, the UK Government are investing £26 million in practical action around the world to reduce demand, strengthen enforcement, ensure effective legal frameworks and develop sustainable livelihoods for affected communities. We are providing funding to Interpol to expand its work on tracking and intercepting illegal shipments of ivory, rhino horn and other illegal wildlife products.

Also, the four-year Waylay II project starts this year. It will improve awareness and understanding of advanced investigative techniques in Kenya, Uganda, Singapore, Vietnam and China. We have funded the British military to provide tracker training for park rangers in African states. We have also worked with China to deliver joint training to African border forces, and we have committed up to £4 million to the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime—Interpol is one of the five organisations involved in the ICCWC—to help to strengthen criminal justice systems and co-ordinate support at regional, national and international levels to combat wildlife and forest crime. We have already paid £1.6 million of that money this month.

Jim Shannon: The Minister has touched on this, but I asked in my contribution what help was being given to support my opposite number and we will explore options together.

Dr Coffey: I have already pointed out that we have funded the British military to provide tracker training. I attended a project in South Africa, where we have worked with an organisation involving the Tusk Trust to increase anti-poacher training and the techniques to do that. More than one Member has asked about this, but we are investigating, as the 25-year environment plan said, the feasibility of a more established poaching taskforce. Just last week, I was in France speaking to my opposite number and we will explore options together. This work does not need to solely involve the UK Government or the British military; there should be a collective effort to extend it.

The Crown Prosecution Service has worked with officials in key states such as Kenya and Tanzania to share its expertise and to help to strengthen the enforcement activities in those countries. Part of the UK Government’s funding is the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ IWT Challenge Fund. It funds 47 projects around the world and has a value of just over £14 million.

Those projects include training of rangers, border force agents and prosecutors; campaigns to reduce the demand for products in key markets; supporting legislative reforms; community-based projects to help people and benefit from it, for example through tourism. It also funds projects aimed at tackling corruption, by engaging with Governments, enforcement agencies and the private sector. There is also mapping of one area, as the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton referred to. The next round of the IWT Challenge Fund is expected to open for applications later this year. I am sure that we will welcome any new projects, and I hope to announce the successful applicants to round four of the fund later this spring.

We are also strengthening action against IWT at home. We have consulted on proposals to introduce a total ban on UK sales of ivory, with narrowly defined and carefully targeted exemptions. It was welcome that we received more than 70,000 responses, with overwhelming support for a ban. A response to the consultation will be published shortly.

I know that hon. Members often ask, “What is ‘shortly’? When will it happen?” We want to ensure that any ban we propose will be effective and will not be open to legal challenge. That is why we need to go through, very carefully, every representation that has been made to us. If we did not do that, we would be subject to legal challenge, which could derail the legislation that is already being drafted on some of the big items, where there is no dispute about what we want to take forward. I can assure the Chamber that officials and lawyers are already actively working on this issue.

In the short time I have left, I will again mention the London conference. It will have three main themes—

Angela Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: Forgive me, but I want to try to get through as many of the points that Members raised as possible.

IWT is a serious organised crime, so one area that we will focus on is illicit financial flows and corruption, which is key, as well as strengthening networks of law enforcement agents and helping frontline countries to co-ordinate across the trade routes. As I referred to earlier, we will build coalitions, including with the NGOs, and we will continue to work on encouraging countries to close markets in this trade.

Quite a lot was said about bagpipes, which I am sure are a key reason why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recognised the need for musical instruments to have an element of exemption.

In addition, I recognise today the absolute passion shown by the hon. Members for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith). The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge asked about the situation post Brexit. I can assure her that our commitment to working with Interpol, and indeed with our friends in the EU, will continue unabated. As for the scientific committee, it is fair to say that our experts from Kew and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee are well regarded. We will need to work on how we take that co-operation forward in future.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) was right to praise and to be proud of the specialist crime unit in Scotland. The hon. Member for Stroud asked a specific question about official development assistance. The Department for International Development already provides funding for the National Crime Agency to tackle corruption specifically; I think there is work in 29 countries around the world. That work will continue.
One thing that it is worth pointing out is that of course we want to tackle poaching but hon. Members will recognise that we also need to do a lot of work to preserve habitat, because the destruction of habitat is also a major challenge.

With regard to the beneficial ownership of overseas territories, in reality progress is happening. The UK concluded an exchange of notes with overseas territories with financial centres and with the Crown dependencies on the exchange of beneficial ownership. That work is moving on. I recognise that the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton may want quicker progress in that area, but I can assure her that beneficial ownership information should be available on request within 24 hours, or within one hour in urgent cases.

We are preparing for post-Brexit—the IT systems that we need to upscale and the issuing of permits to support the movement of such elements. I have already said no to meeting Duncan McNair, but I know that officials have agreed to meet him, so that is at least something. As for the historic, artistic and cultural objects test, I am afraid that the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton will need to wait for the response to the consultation. Overall, we are taking action.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the anti-corruption strategy and the illegal wildlife trade.

Equality of Voting Ages

[GERAINT DAVIES in the Chair]

4 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the equality of voting ages in the UK.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I want to begin by talking about why voting equality is an important issue for me. When I first entered this place following the election in June, it was not my first time in the Chamber. In fact, I first sat on the green Benches in October 2009. I came here as part of a Youth Parliament delegation, debating the issues of the day and calling on Members to lower the voting age to 16. I have not stopped campaigning on the issue since.

Voting equality is an extremely important issue to me and to many people—especially young people, although it is not just young people—across the UK, and it is not going away. I am here to give a voice to each and every 16 and 17-year-old in my constituency of Midlothian and across the UK until they can have their voice heard in this place through the ballot box. I spend a lot of time talking to and engaging with young people in my constituency, including young people who run a local youth radio network; who volunteer for a range of fantastic local charities; who help to collect food for their local food bank; who champion Scotland, Midlothian and the UK through their sporting achievements; and who represent my young constituents in the Scottish Youth Parliament. There are some remarkable young people in Midlothian and across the UK. They have informed and ambitious ideas about how their community and society as a whole should work. They meet me and tell me their thoughts on policy. They give me their honest opinion on how I am doing as their MP, yet they could not vote for me at the election, and that frustrates them deeply.

The feeling I had back then, when I sat in the Chamber, was that I was a token young person being asked to give my thoughts and opinions without being allowed to vote. I felt that was echoed a few weeks ago when Jordhi, a fantastic young woman from the Youth Parliament, was here speaking at an event with Theresa May on the centenary of some women gaining the vote. She said:

“But it's important to remember that the Representation of the People Act, given royal assent one hundred years ago today, only allowed some women over 30 and all men over 21 to vote. Despite the journey of strife taken by passionate, principled and determined women, it was only the first step in an even longer journey to equality. It took another 10 years for women to win the same voting rights as men, and still today we face inequality at every turn. The journey is not yet complete, the vision not yet realised.”

I could not agree with Jordhi more. She spoke very eloquently. This is a journey about voting equality. We have come a long way, and we absolutely have to celebrate that. We have to celebrate our achievements on women gaining equal voting rights, but we must not allow ourselves to rest. We have overcome a great hurdle, but there are more hurdles to come.
Danielle Rowley: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I will come on to the differences in voting ages across the UK in just a moment.

Let us look at what has already happened in this place on votes at 16. I am glad and grateful to have secured this debate. I also spoke during the debate on the Representation of the People (Young People’s Enfranchisement and Education) Bill secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon). There were many passionate contributions during the debate—I made a short contribution—but the Bill did not quite make it to the next stage. It was talked out by the Conservatives for fear of losing a vote in Parliament on whether to proceed. I use the word “fear” deliberately. Some say that the Government do not want young people to vote because they are scared that they do not agree with their policies. That move during the debate showed me that the Government seemed scared of their own MPs, some of whom I am sure would vote to support votes at 16.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a very good case as to why young people should be able to vote. My party, the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party, opposed the extension of the voting age before the 2014 referendum in Scotland, but having seen how young people in Scotland were so enthusiastically involved in our referendum and the debate about our country and Scotland’s future within the United Kingdom, on reflection we decided to change our position. We now support the extension of the voting age to include 16 and 17-year-olds. I look forward to working with her and others in a personal capacity to persuade other Members of this place that extending the voting age is something that we should try to achieve.

Danielle Rowley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. I absolutely agree that all parties can get behind the issue and work together on it. I would very much welcome that from all parties from all parts of the House. That brings me perfectly on to my next point. Former Chancellor George Osborne has said that “not only is extending the vote the right thing to do but...the cause is also unstoppable.”

I know that the Scottish Conservatives are supporters, with their leader, Ruth Davidson saying that she is a fully paid-up member of the votes at 16 club. We can speak and we can work together, but when can we vote on the issue in the House? Or are the Government going to block us from voting as well?

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate and congratulate her on her speech, in which she has made the case very well. If the Government are nervous about this issue, surely the best answer is to test it in elections. We have seen the impact the change had in Scotland. Young people in Wales will have the right to vote very soon. Surely by extending that to England and Northern Ireland, we can test turnout and appetite and we can provide that education in schools and then look to expand beyond that.

Danielle Rowley: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. As a Scottish MP, I am uncomfortable that some young people in the UK can vote in certain elections, and others cannot. I hope that we can fix that inequality in the franchise.

In Scotland, 16 and 17-year-olds can vote in local elections, Scottish elections and referendums. Our young people have shown that they have the knowledge, passion and ideas to drive forward a dynamic democracy. They showed that especially when they voted in and engaged with the Scottish independence referendum. They made politicians think differently, act differently and campaign differently. We saw some very vibrant campaigns, which were different from what we have had in the past and really reached out to all corners of society. Far from being apathetic and disengaged, more than 88% of 16 and 17-year-olds registered to vote in the Scottish independence referendum, and about 75% turned out to vote, which is much higher than the average for 18 to 24-year-olds in general elections. Even the most recent general election saw a turnout of only about 59% for 20 to 24-year-olds.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate; it is fantastic to see the pressure being kept up. Young people in Plymouth want the right to vote as well. We do not have a devolved Assembly or Parliament to lower the voting age for local elections; we are relying on this place to do it. Whether a 16 or 17-year-old lives in Perth, Penarth or Plymouth, they should have the
right to vote. The message from young people in the city that I represent is that those voting rights should be equal across the UK.

Danielle Rowley: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and fantastic alliteration. The Scottish experience shows that lowering the voting age could be a key way to improve voter registration rates and engage younger people in politics. The political habits that we form at a young age are likely to be carried into later life, so lowering the voting age could support greater voter registration and achieve greater political engagement in our society. The voting age is not just about voting, but about supporting and broadening citizens' political engagement and empowerment.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate, and for allowing me to make an intervention. Does she agree that by extending the franchise politicians of today will be remembered in a far better light? It works successfully in Scotland. Extending the franchise to that very important part of our communities would be a relatively simple step to achieve some good news headlines.

Danielle Rowley: My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. I would like to quote the member of the Scottish Youth Parliament for part of my constituency, Laura Adams, as she makes the point so eloquently I could not have put it better in my own words:

“In general, we face the issue of trying to get people out to the polls to vote—so why should we actively prevent engaged, informed and politically motivated young people from voting? It can only help represent a wider section of society; and it is a section of society who are working, in school and university, and living through the issues that are debated and scrutinised daily in the houses of parliament.”

She makes a fantastic point about engagement, and why it is important for 16 and 17-year-olds across the UK to have a say in Parliament.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making an excellent point; I agree with all the points that she has made in her speech. Does she agree that now is a particularly good time for the UK Parliament to look at this issue? Surely the period between elections provides a good opportunity to extend the franchise.

Opportunities to do so when considering Bills on devolution and the EU referendum were rejected, on the grounds that they have an investment in the country. We will decide how much is taken from those young people in Lasswade High School will not have voted on issues that directly affect every taxpayer. Those decisions will affect their job prospects, their education and their safety net if something should go wrong, how their money is spent, and how their society works. However, those young people in Lasswade High School will not be able to elect the Government who make such crucial decisions about their lives. In Parliament, we have debated the Budget, Brexit, housing, education and jobs, and have voted on issues that directly affect every taxpayer in the country. We will decide how much is taken from people’s wages and how that money will be spent. Sadly, 16 and 17-year-olds, even if they are married, have children, are working full time, or indeed have signed up to serve in our armed forces, do not have a say on how the Government spend their taxes.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with members of the Slough youth parliament, and students of Upton Court Grammar School in Slough, whom I discovered during a recent visit were virtually all in favour of votes at 16, that votes at 16 should be introduced in England as well?

Danielle Rowley: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend’s constituents sound very engaged indeed. As I said, the inequality of voting ages across the UK makes me uneasy.

Those who oppose extending the franchise often cite the fact that the legal age for smoking and drinking alcohol is 18, but I find that a very odd and unfair comparison. The legal age restrictions in those circumstances are based on the related health risks, which are borne out in facts and evidence. Those arguments do not hold for the act of voting, which is clearly not bad for someone’s health—in fact, I would argue that it is very good for it. That argument also confuses public and private rights. The right to vote is a public right,
but drinking alcohol, for example, is a private right. It is not contradictory for 16-years-olds to hold one right but not the other.

Things that a person can do at the age of 16 include giving full consent to medical treatment; leaving school and entering work or training; paying income tax and national insurance; obtaining tax credits and welfare benefits; consenting to a sexual relationship; getting married or entering a civil partnership; becoming a director of a company; and joining the armed forces. I am sure that everyone would agree that all those things are affected by how we vote in Parliament, so it is not right that young people can do them and their lives can be greatly affected by someone for whom they cannot vote.

There are also benefits in young people voting. Compared perhaps with older generations, younger people access more education and information digitally. They are often very aware of current issues through citizenship education. Some 85% of secondary schools have school councils, and across the UK many more than 20,000 young people are active in local youth councils and youth parliaments, which work in close collaboration with local councils. Often young people have a really acute idea of what their local services are doing, and how that is affected by Government policy.

So what are the Government scared of? If they are worried that 16 and 17-year-olds will not vote for the Conservative party, I would say that they certainly will not, once they do get to vote, if they feel that they have been disenfranchised by the Conservative party. If they do vote, 16 and 17-year-olds only make up 2.9% of the population over 16, so are unlikely to cause any huge change at an election. Nevertheless, it is critical that they have their say.

I will end with some questions for the Minister. Has the Minister met her local Youth Parliament reps and spoken about votes at 16? What are their opinions? What are the reasons for the Government refusing to extend the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds? Are those reasons exclusive to that age group, and do they incur any health risks? Does the Minister consider that we have an equal and fair system of voting across the UK? Does she think there are any issues with young people in different regions being able to vote, and others not? Will she agree to a debate and a vote in the House of Commons on this issue? Now that 16 and 17-year-olds can vote in some elections, it is for that consideration that we are giving it. In the time available, I will try to go through the reasons why the Government do not agree that the age of majority ought to be lowered. The hon. Lady asked whether I think it is okay to have inequality in the voting franchises. I will answer that upfront, at the outset. We ought to be clear that what is happening is a consequence of the devolution settlements. I do not in any way speak against the devolution settlements, which rightly allow the devolved Administrations to take decisions in their competences. That is why we have an inequality in the voting ages. That is how it has come about. I will not enter into what a devolution settlement ought to contain, but that is what it is and that is why the inequality exists.

The principle reason why the UK Government believe that the age ought to remain at 18 is that the latest poll on the issue, in April 2017, indicated that only a third of the public is in favour of lowering the voting age for all UK elections. It is for that reason that the Government believe the voting age should stay at 18, and why our manifesto for the recent election included the commitment to maintain it. That is also the answer to the hon. Lady’s question about whether there will be a debate and vote in Government time. No, there will not be, because our manifesto said we would retain the voting age at 18. That is the shortest and simplest answer I can give to that question.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Chloe Smith: I am terribly sorry. The hon. Lady has only just arrived and I have very few minutes to answer the important points put by hon. Members who were here earlier.

On the rights of young people, 18 is widely recognised as the age one becomes an adult. For example, that is why we start jury service at 18. Some things that people can do at 16, such as join the Army, get married or enter into a civil partnership, can only be done with parental consent.

The UK has seen a general shift to a higher minimum age requirement on a number of things in recent years, with cross-party support. For example, in 1997 the minimum age for buying fireworks was raised from 16 to 18. In 2005, gambling at a casino was restricted to 18-year-olds and upwards. In 2007, the legal minimum age for buying tobacco in England, Scotland and Wales was raised from 16 to 18. You get the picture, Mr Davies. There are a number of things where we have moved the age from 16 to 18.

Danielle Rowley: Will the Minister give way?

Chloe Smith: I will, but the hon. Lady will get fewer answers to her questions.

Danielle Rowley: Does the Minister agree that the examples she gives incur a health risk or a danger, and voting does not? Perhaps she thinks it does.
Chloe Smith: The overriding point is that we do not have a single age of maturity in this country. That is what underpins what the hon. Lady sees as age inequality. We do not have a settled age at which one is thought to become an adult.

I have another important example. In England, those under the age of 18 must remain either in full or part-time education or start an apprenticeship. In other parts of the UK, individuals may start full-time work at 16. Supporters of the lower voting age thus cite the principle of no taxation without representation. Indeed, I heard the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) argue last week that there should be no representation without taxation. Neither expression is particularly accurate on how our country works. Many people pay various amounts of income tax, including none if they earn below the threshold, at various points throughout life.

Let us move on to research into the voting age. The Electoral Commission undertook the most comprehensive review to date. In 2004, a large consultation exercise showed mixed results. There was support for lowering the voting age, but there was also strong support for keeping it at the current minimum of 18 from the general opinion polling conducted alongside it. Crucially, young people themselves were divided on whether they felt they were ready to be given voting rights at 16. The Electoral Commission therefore concluded that the minimum age should not be changed.

In 2008, the last Labour Government established the youth citizenship commission, which similarly got mixed results. In 2013 and 2017, YouGov polls found mixed results. Only 30% were in favour of lowering the age to 16, and nearly half were against.

On international comparisons, it is important to recognise that there is variation around the world, but most democracies consider 18 to be the right age to enfranchise young people. The UK Government believe that 18 is the right age.

I have long made the argument, including when meeting youth parliamentarians—the hon. Lady asked me about that, and I am delighted to say I maintain very good relationships with the young people in my constituency—that engaging young people is a far wider question than the technical one of the age at which somebody can vote. We need to engage young people more broadly. The Government are doing that in a number of ways, including through existing measures, from supporting the Youth Parliament through to gaining the views of young people on specific legislation, such as changes in mental health provision. There is a consultation about that at this very moment. Of course, citizenship is on the curriculum in schools and there are online Government resources.

The hon. Lady began her remarks by celebrating the suffrage centenary. The Government are doing a lot more this year, including reaching out to younger voters. We have a full set of education projects. A package of resources is coming out, including in secondary schools, as well as a democracy ambassador scheme and a pack for parliamentarians to use to engage young people in their constituencies. I hope all hon. Members in the Chamber will work with me across parties on that important work.

I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian again for introducing this important debate. She has spoken well, but I do not think the public is convinced by the hon. Lady’s arguments. It is for that reason—I have cited the evidence—that the Government continue to believe that the voting age should remain at 18 and not be lowered. Given that our manifesto commitment was in line with that, we will not provide Government time for a debate. However, that does not detract from the central point that young people are part of democracy and society and that their voice matters. The Government and I will continue to work to ensure that young people take up their rightful place in politics in order to grow our vibrant democracy. That is what we ought to all be working together on, on a cross-party basis.

The hon. Lady and others have a job more broadly in the country to persuade the public at large of her arguments. The Government’s manifesto position won the day—we formed the Government after the 2017 election—and in that we said that the voting age would remain at 18.

Question put and agreed to.
Pensions Auto-enrolment

4.31 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered pensions auto-enrolment.

It is a great pleasure to have secured this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Introducing auto-enrolment in the UK was a huge landmark, as is this debate—it is the first since the measure was introduced in legislation and since the Government review. Auto-enrolment was introduced as part of a package of policies designed to foster a saving culture and a new generation of savers whose long-term financial needs are prioritised as much as their short-term ones. It is an example of fiscally responsible policy, and paves the way to a better tomorrow by giving people greater financial security and independence in their retirement.

It is apt that we are having this debate. Just over a week ago we hit the milestone figure of 1 million employers engaged with the policy. The effect can be seen across the country including in my constituency, where 1,030 employers have introduced auto-enrolment schemes, which means that 9,000 people in Chippenham are benefiting.

To appreciate that success, it is important to consider the context. Saving for retirement has traditionally been seen as something we put off, and it was put off. In addition, it has always had connotations of being difficult, complicated and expensive to organise, especially given that a large proportion of employers did not offer a scheme. Traditionally, there have been low levels of engagement with pensions. People have relied on the state pension and, if need be, pension benefits. Given our ageing and expanding population, that is no longer tenable. Auto-enrolment helps to make the system more sustainable by, in effect, supplementing welfare payments with private provision.

Many have traditionally seen the state pension as a universal scheme that will be enough but, as I have seen in my constituency, the introduction of auto-enrolment has started to shift that mindset dramatically. The Association of British Insurers summed it up well: “Engaging people to save adequately for their retirement is one of the biggest public challenges we face.”

The ABI believes that auto-enrolment is the best means to ensure people save adequately for their retirement. It is estimated that, by 2019-20, an extra £20 billion a year will be saved into workplace pensions as a direct result of auto-enrolment.

There are many reasons why the roll-out is proving successful. Perhaps most importantly, it is simple and is basically done for the employee. In addition, the employer contributions are a strong incentive. The rate of employer and employee contributions is going up in increments, which helps businesses to prepare and ensures that employees get into the mindset of saving for pensions. It will go up to 8% in 2019, but it is crucial that we do not leave it there. We need to ensure that pensions provide enough money for retirement and that they are fit for purpose.

The Pensions Policy Institute conducted an international comparison of auto-enrolment schemes and found that our employment contributions lag far behind those of our European partners. As higher statutory minimum contributions are phased in over 2018-19, employees will find themselves bearing more of the burden than their employers, which could drive opt-outs. The art is getting the balance right between employee and employer contributions and getting the rates right to ensure that saving does not damage business.

Being an opt-out scheme has helped auto-enrolment to be successful, and the opt-out rates have been lower than expected. The Department for Work and Pensions modelling assumed a 25% opt-out rate, but in 2017 it was just 9%. Some 23% more of the working population now participate in a pension than in 2012.

Traditionally, it has been hard to engage young people with pensions, as they tend to prioritise their disposable income over a pension in 50-plus years’ time. That means that they either never opt in or opt in later, which does not give them the time to accrue a decent pension. I am pleased to say that, since the introduction of automatic enrolment, the group that has had the largest increase in participation is young people—44% of those aged 22 to 29 now participate. We have also traditionally struggled to engage women, but since the introduction of automatic enrolment, participation rates have been catching up. Only 40% of eligible women participated in 2012, but by 2016 the number was 73%.

One concern about automatic enrolment was how the small business community would respond. However, it has not only coped with the policy, but embraced it. It is important that we thank it for its contribution. The Confederation of British Industry stated: “Automatic enrolment is a successful policy built on sound principles—employer support is key to this”.

The main concern was about the perceived bureaucracy and the time it takes to administer the system, but 2017 Government-commissioned qualitative research found that most small and micro employers thought that the cost and time burden involved was lower than they anticipated.

On outcomes versus expectations, one of the key points in the Government’s review, published last December, was that the proposal would increase median earners’ private pension provision by more than 40% and lower earners’ provision by more than 80%. The review stated that reducing the auto-enrolment to 18 is essential to ensure that we foster a generation of savers, and will bring a further 900,000 people into pension saving. Scraping the £5,876 lower earnings limit so that every pound of earnings is pensionable means that someone with a career-average salary of £27,000 will build up an extra £50,000 over 40 years of pension saving. The review also seeks to increase engagement to reach all, partly by building a sense of personal ownerships of pensions through initiatives such as the pension dashboard.

The review considered what to do about the self-employed pension problem. The self-employed are currently not eligible for auto-enrolment, yet the number of self-employed people in the UK is rising—in fact, it rose by 730,000 between 2008 and 2015 alone. That increase is combined with a decline in the number of self-employed people opting into pension schemes to only 19%. It is predicted that, within 20 years, a third of the employment market could be self-employed, meaning that nearly a third of the employment market could be without a pension, which is the opposite of the vision for auto-enrolment. I have developed a reputation for banging on about this...
It is undeniable that the auto-enrolment opt-out rates are so low because the employer contribution acts as an incentive. However, I take on board the 1% drive to the bottom. We should offer a Government contribution of 1% for the self-employed who invest 3%, and 2% to those investing 5%. The rates at which the Government contributions kick in could be increased as we develop a pension saving psyche, but the Government and employee contributions would not be intrinsically linked. It would be cheaper than the 4% concept and would offer an incentive for higher savers.

A common argument used against the Government acting as the employer is that it would represent a substantial transfer of tax from the employed to the self-employed, which could be seen as unfair. To address this concern, first, I have benched this lower than the employee system will be in 2019. Secondly, our entire system is based on redistribution and acts as a giant insurance scheme, so that transfer exists in thousands of other ways. Thirdly, in the long run it will cost the state less, because otherwise a massive cohort of the population will be reliant on the state pension provision. Fourthly, we are currently in danger of the opposite. Martin Palmer of Zurich stated:

We are creating a rapidly growing new divide between those who are employed, with access to auto-enrolment, and the self-employed. We need to ensure nobody is excluded from the chance to build up a nest egg simply because they don't work...nine to five.

I do not believe that a default nudge is the same thing as an auto-enrolment system, nor will it be as successful. I urge the Minister not to discount auto-enrolment for the self-employed, and to commission a detailed review into options that include the Government as the employer. In reference to the employer-employee relationship, the Taylor review stated:

"The Government could look to establish a similar principle for the self-employed", yet the 2017 Government review dismissed that option without even costing it.

In conclusion, automatic enrolment has reversed the decline in workplace pension saving. Total annual contributions are at their highest for a decade. Around 10 million people will be newly saving or saving more by 2018. The policy is proving successful, but the review has highlighted that there is room for improvement. I am pleased that the Government are making progress. To create a truly sustainable, long-term solution for pensions, we must ensure that we have a system that works for the self-employed, given that one in seven self-employed people in the UK are saving into a pension, versus three-quarters of employees, and the number of self-employed is rising at such a considerable rate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. As four Members wish to speak, you each have about five minutes. I call Nigel Mills.

4.45 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) on securing this important debate. I will not waste my precious five minutes by recounting the
triumphant statistics on how successful auto-enrolment has been, but about 1,250 businesses in Amber Valley have been enrolled and about 13,000 of my constituents now have access to a workplace pension for the first time, which is a very important achievement.

It is important to look at where we can go in future. I have been through the important work of the auto-enrolment review. There are so many great ideas in there. My only slight frustration is that it will take so long to bring them all into force. I accept that we have not even finished the roll-out, we have not done the escalation and there is not much time in Parliament, but some of the ideas are important. Perhaps the mid-2020s is a little later than we could achieve them by.

We need to find a fix for people who have multiple jobs but are earning under £10,000 in each of them, so are not enrolled by any of their employments. There probably are not that many people with two jobs that sit perfectly under that, but bearing in mind that we have a tax coding system—we tell employers every year, via Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, how much personal allowance they can give each employee and how much tax they can pay—does not strike me as beyond the wit of man to put on that coding notice how much pension contribution they ought to pay. Not much data would be given away. We could just say that a person has sufficient income elsewhere, so the employer should enrol them and pay a full contribution. I hope that can be looked at.

I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to find a system for the self-employed, although I am not sure that we can force it into auto-enrolment, because the whole idea of inertia will not work. I am a little more cautious than her, because I am not sure how we could square having a much lower national insurance rate for the self-employed with giving them a pension contribution in excess of what we give people who are employed and earning the same income. That may be a step too far.

I tend towards a default from the tax system. If the Government move forward with making tax digital and requiring quarterly returns, that may take out some of the big annual bills to pay if there is just a default on the annual returns. Perhaps the way forward is having a default quarterly system where the self-employed could be encouraged to take a pension contribution of the right percentage. I am not sure how we fix choosing them a pension scheme. I suspect that, if we did that, we would have to choose NEST as the default option. The Government should be a bit cautious about defaulting people into an individual scheme. If that scheme goes wrong, they will get the blame for returns not being right.

Even if we get to the 8% that we are due to get to in a couple of years without seeing opt-out rates go far higher, that will still not be enough pension saving for most of those people to have the savings that they need for their retirement. We will have to do more to encourage people to put more into those pension schemes. The trick to that has to be greater engagement. I hope the Government will take forward the dashboard as a key part of that, so that people can understand what they have in pension saving across myriad pots.

We need clear and consistently applied savings targets so that people know how much they should have saved by the time they reach 35, 40 or 45, and understand how much they have saved for their pension, what that means and how much more they ought to save. That is the missing link. I get my annual pension statement and have no idea whether it is good. It sounds great that I have a few thousand pounds—that sounds like a great asset—but what does it really mean in pension terms? How much more do I need? How much do my peers have? A system with clear guidance about how much people should save and what that really means would boost pensions engagement.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) on securing this debate and commend her for the brilliant way she outlined some of the issues we need to think about. I commend in particular her dissection of the challenges of self-employment and the options we have for creatively addressing the lack of provision by the self-employed for their retirement incomes.

It is not often in this place that we get to debate policies we can genuinely describe as having been well executed and successful, and it is even rarer that we do so about a policy that both the Labour party and the Conservative party can claim credit for, having initiated and overseen it—the policy has been around since at least 2008, when it was first implemented. I would go further and describe auto-enrolment as transformational. It has profoundly positive effects for our society, and it was achieved with remarkably little opposition from employers or employees. We have seen a collaborative approach involving Government agencies, business, the Pensions Regulator and others. The strong sense that auto-enrolment is the responsible and right thing to do in the face of the overarching challenge of declining employer-provided pensions is one of the great strengths underpinning its success.

Auto-enrolment’s success has received remarkably little attention in the mainstream press compared with the coverage of the various strikes and protests in recent years in response to the changes we have tried to introduce to make public sector pensions more sustainable. The successes of auto-enrolment have, by and large, passed under the radars of those not immediately affected by it, but as I said, it ultimately benefits the whole of society. I will highlight a couple of points that I would like the Minister to touch on. My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham covered the self-employed far better than I would, so I will not cover it.

Behind the success of auto-enrolment is a great recognition of people’s central behavioural trait of spending far too little time thinking about their retirement income and even less time taking positive decisions to make provision for it. By coming up with a system that automatically enrolls people and puts the onus on the employee actively to opt out, we successfully increased the number of people benefiting from pensions. The system relies on inertia—passive decision making by millions of people. However, we have introduced other pension changes that will require those very same people, when they reach retirement age, to take a close interest in a complex menu of retirement options, and the last thing that we need them to be at that point in their lives is passive decision makers. That is a concern. We do not want people to take decisions that ruin the retirement income they spent decades building up.
Stephen Crabb: I agree with everything my hon. Friend says. Pension freedoms are great, but we want people to be well informed and educated about the consequences of the choices that will be available to them, particularly when it comes to drawing down large cash lump sums from their retirement pots.

Low opt-out rates are part of the success story of auto-enrolment, but let us not be complacent about them. So far, contribution rates have been very low. Those rates will go up this April and again in April 2019. Despite all the positive effects of increasing the minimum wage and raising the personal allowance threshold for income tax, there will be people on lower incomes who feel a financial pinch in their take-home pay, and opt-out rates may increase as a result. I encourage the Minister to monitor what goes on in response to the increase in contribution rates and to be ready to reinforce the strong positive messaging about the importance of employers and employees sticking with their pension arrangements so that they do not see that increase as a reason to get energised and look at actively opting out of the system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham mentioned young people. I strongly welcome the Government’s indication that they will look to lower the minimum age threshold to 18, but why 18? If 16 and 17-year-olds are working and earning £10,000 or more, why should they not also be captured by auto-enrolment and benefit from it? No 16, 17 or 18-year-old should leave school without basic education in what auto-enrolment is all about and without being equipped to make good decisions.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): As an ex-careers adviser, I certainly share those concerns. Education is vital. The right hon. Gentleman talks about a tipping point. If education were given at an earlier stage, people would make more effective and informed decisions at that tipping point, which is a key transition. Too many people see a pension as an unaffordable luxury. Education would help.

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point very well.

Let me make one further point before I conclude and allow other hon. Members to speak. My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham appeared to indicate that she supports rates increasing above those that have been set out for April 2019. I absolutely agree: both employees and employers will need to make even greater contributions. It is easy to talk about that in this place, but it is much more difficult to get it across to the businesses and individuals affected, so I would be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about that. He is a brilliant Pensions Minister. I heard him speak in another part of the Palace earlier, and he has an incredibly strong grasp of the detail, which is exactly what we need from Ministers as we get to grips with the challenges of auto-enrolment.
My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham eloquently described the issues faced by the self-employed. I agree that a participation rate in that growing sector of 19% is far too low. That is rightly a matter of concern. She produced some interesting ideas, and I look forward to the ministerial response. She and I would agree that there needs to be a structure in place for the self-employed.

Again, it comes back to default and inertia: as long as there is no structure in place, they will not feel a need to go in, participate and make the provision for retirements that they require.

Many good things are coming out of the review. Of course, I have extra questions to ask my hon. Friend the Minister. Has the Department made an estimate of the number of individuals with earnings below the trigger rate of £10,000 per annum who are opting into the scheme? That would be good to know, to work through whether the scheme can be usefully extended below that rate. Opt-out rates are particularly low, but less so for small and micro-employers. Is that a matter of concern for the Department? What is it doing to address that?

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) referred to the need to understand the position and what can be done about it. I would love to hear more from the Minister about the pensions dashboard, which he referred to in his intervention, which I want to see extended to cover not just pensions but more assets. I also want to hear more about the mid-life review. My hon. Friend the Minister is a mere spring chicken, so he may not be under any personal time pressure to implement a mid-life review, but an MOT, as recommended by John Cridland, would be an excellent way to help people, as the Minister said, understand where they stand.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I call Paul Masterton—

I think you have got time for your pension.

5.2 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Davies. I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) on securing it. We are here to debate one of the most successful savings policies in pensions history. As a result of auto-enrolment, more than 9 million additional people are saving for their retirement, including 5,000 in East Renfrewshire and more than 63,000 in Scotland as a whole. Four in five of today’s eligible workers are saving, and those benefiting the most are the lowest earners, those aged 20 to 29, and women. Opt-out rates still sit at under 10%.

There is wide consensus in both politics and the industry that the policy is working, and that holds true even for some groups who people feared would struggle with implementation, such as small businesses. Those businesses make up a large proportion of the 990 businesses in East Renfrewshire now complying with their auto-enrolment duties.

As others have said, the utilisation of inertia to build a savings culture with a new generation of savers is the key element of the policy. As the People’s Pension—a master trust serving just under 3 million savers in auto-enrolment—said when I met it a few months ago, "the policy was developed following a variety of failed pension saving initiatives which lacked the necessary incentives to encourage low and moderate earners to save for retirement in practice." I am incredibly proud of the Government and this policy, which—I do not think this is overstating it—"is a savings revolution that has become the envy of Governments across the globe.

DWP analysis shows that reforms could increase median weekly private pension income by up to £261 a week by 2070—"hopingly even I will be retired then. If sustained, the reforms could significantly reduce the risk of pensioner poverty over the longer term, which in turn will reduce levels of dependency on the state.

So far, auto-enrolment has been rightly heralded as a great policy success. However, it is a fragile policy. The test of its robustness will come when savers’ and employers’ contributions begin to be raised to a meaningful level. The rates of required contributions are too low and even at the final rate of escalation they will still be too low. Such contributions are also often combined with investments in a default fund that is not regularly and properly scrutinised, leading to poor investment returns.

While Pension Wise is sensible Government policy, it is predicated on individuals becoming engaged investors as they get to their 50s, so it will not mitigate the risks for most people, who do not think about pensions until six months out from retirement age. Pension providers should be tasked to establish high-quality default products, with appropriate and aligned governance. The Financial Guidance and Claims Bill, working its way through the Commons, is a good piece of legislation that can help address that.

Like others, I was delighted by the Government’s announcement before Christmas of reforms to auto-enrolment to ensure that saving was from the first pound. The system with the lower earnings limit was basically just an administrative hassle, and in many cases it was ignored by employers. It will particularly help those with multiple jobs, and expand auto-enrolment to cover those over 18 and under 22. I agree that there seems to be no good reason not to look at 16 and 17-year-olds, particularly those who have left school and are working full-time, earning more than £10,000.

Bringing a new generation into an immediate culture of pensions saving is incredibly significant and will have long-term benefits for society as a whole. That is why the Government must not slow down the escalation timetable for contributions. Yes, workers and employers need time to adjust, and we need to strike a careful balance so we do not get a sudden increase in the opt-out rate, but the current timetable is suitable, sustainable and should be stuck to.

Key to the success of auto-enrolment is a new culture of pension saving through better and more creative financial education and engagement. Again, the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill does a good deal of work on that. Although I will save default guidance for another day, the Minister has my full support for the work he is doing on that, and particularly on the pensions dashboard—an exciting development that will be hugely useful for people however much they are earning and wherever they are working.

Moving forward, the Government need to link pension provision and the next auto-enrolment review with further consideration of the Taylor report. The definition of “worker” in auto-enrolment regulations is becoming increasingly ambiguous, with employment status uncertainty growing. That needs to be addressed to determine precisely who falls within the scope of auto-enrolment so that...
business and individuals have certainty. Since auto-enrolment was brought in, I spent a heck of a lot of time giving legal advice on that, and it was always an absolute nightmare. We need to do some work to tighten up who falls within and outside the scope of the auto-enrolment regime.

I will not touch on self-employment, because my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham did a good job on that. I am interested to see what she has up her sleeve, and if she ever wants any assistance in “banging on about it”, as she said, I am more than happy to help.

In 1948, a 65-year-old could expect to spend 13.5 years in the retirement phase of life. They now can expect it to be 33.6% of their life. The UK must remain one of the best places in the world to grow old, and ensuring that people have a decent income in retirement must be at the heart of that. I commend the Government, and this Pensions Minister—who is well liked in the industry and who I hope remains in place for a long time—for it is a reminder of the importance of pensions in people’s lives.

In 2004, the Pensions Commission identified that self-employed people are included in auto-enrolment has been disappointing. The announcement of feasibility testing is positive, but it still risks leaving too many millions of workers behind. That matters because, as we have heard, 4.8 million people in our workforce—about 15%—are self-employed, so the numbers are not insignificant.

As far back as 2004, the Pensions Commission identified the self-employed as a group for which pension provision had always been deficient. The need to include self-employed people in attempts to improve pension provision for that group is hardly breaking news, but it simply has not been addressed. I know the Government have argued that that is a complicated issue—the hon. Member for Chippenham also set that out—but the fact that it is complicated does not mean that it should have been kicked into the long grass for as long as it has. There are too many people losing out on opportunities to build on their financial plans for retirement. The fact that something is difficult is not a reason not to do it.

It cannot be beyond the wit of Government. We have heard others, including the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), tell us that we have a great Pensions Minister. I am sure that it is not beyond the wit of the Minister to try to address the issue of helping self-employed people to navigate their way through that difficulty, as set out by the hon. Member for Chippenham. I agree with her, and others, that it is imperative that those on low pay are covered and included in auto-enrolment, for exactly the same reason. As long as they are not, they are denied the chance to prepare financially for their lives after work.

The 2017 review indicated that bringing the low-paid into auto-enrolment would be of great benefit to those workers, but that will not be implemented until the mid-2020s. Given that we know that the earlier in life someone starts paying into their pension, the better their pension is, we need to make progress on that much more quickly. Those on low pay during their working life must not be denied the opportunity to build up a pension pot for their retirement.

The hon. Lady is absolutely correct that persuading young people to save for their pensions is important. The fact that the inclusion of 18-year-olds in auto-enrolment is not expected to be implemented until the 2020s is also extremely disappointing. With a pension crisis looming for younger generations, those who are now 18 years old will have lost out on precious years of potential pension savings if the issue is kicked further down the road. I agree with the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire, for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) and for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) that that really needs to change.

I would say to the Minister that good progress has been made with pension auto-enrolment and it is right that that should be recognised, as the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire and the hon. Member for Horsham pointed out. We have to recognise success when we find it, but there are still whole swathes of the working population who as yet are not eligible for auto-enrolment, and they are at risk of being left without enough years of pension savings if that is not urgently addressed. I know that when the Minister gets to his feet, he will tell us how he intends to do that.

I will end by saying—the Minister will have heard me say this before, if he was listening—that we need a full and independent pension commission, looking holistically at every aspect of pensions, so that we have a system that is as fair as possible for all. We all need to have a system that we can have confidence in and rely on when our working lives are over. We need a pension system that is sustainable and takes into account shifting variables such as life expectancy, which is drastically different depending where in the UK someone lives.

With 1 million pension pots accessed early since reforms enabled that to happen, with the self-employed and young people not included in auto-enrolment until the mid-2020s and with rising life expectancy, the issue of pension provision and pensioner poverty is becoming all the more urgent. That is why I am keen to hear what the Minister has to say on how he will move forward with this.

5.13 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) on initiating this debate and on a thoughtful and challenging contribution, with some ideas in it that I shall come to later.
Forgive me if I say that the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) was right: auto-enrolment is a testament to what the last Labour Government did in initiating the Turner review and putting the wheels in motion for auto-enrolment to be implemented. As I have often said to the Minister, it is deeply welcome that there has been continuity of policy. He said only yesterday in his address to the TUC that, on issues such as pensions, continuity wherever possible is absolutely critical.

I was personally involved in some of the discussions with successive Secretaries of State and with Adair Turner, and the basis that was laid and the point we have reached now are both very welcome indeed. It has led to a better workplace pension landscape than before, with an additional 10 million workers estimated to be newly saving or saving more as a result of auto-enrolment. It has led to an additional £17 billion of pension savings being put away, mostly by low-income workers. We welcome the move by the Government to reduce the age of eligibility for auto-enrolment to 18, as that should lead to more people becoming aware of the importance of pensions at a younger age. The sooner that is introduced, the better.

However, for all the welcome progress that has been made, it is not a perfect system and there are issues that need to be addressed at the next stages to make the pension landscape better. First, the threshold over which workers are automatically enrolled is too high. According to the latest statistics from the Department for Work and Pensions, 37% of female workers, 33% of workers with a disability and 28% of black and minority ethnic workers are not eligible for master trust saving through auto-enrolment.

Secondly, auto-enrolment does not cover the self-employed or workers in the gig economy. The impact is felt in particular by female workers, workers with disabilities and black and minority ethnic workers, who are over-represented among low earners, the self-employed, those with multiple jobs and carers. That is why it is absolutely necessary, as the Taylor report recommended, to redefine workers in the gig economy as employees, meaning that they would be eligible for auto-enrolment. As Matthew Taylor said, if it looks like employment and smells like employment, it should be employment.

Having said that, the statistics outlined in various contributions today are stark. Self-employment, and in particular bogus self-employment, are becoming increasingly prominent in the modern economy. Figures released last year suggest that the number of self-employed workers in the UK rose by 23% between 2007 and 2017, from 3.8 million to 4.7 million. That represents a dramatic shift in the nature of the world of work and the way in which the British economy works.

Self-employed people now represent around 15% of the workforce, and 91% of businesses say that they hire contractors. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show that only 19% of the self-employed are saving into a personal pension. That is a worrying trend, and more needs to be done, not least because those concerned face decreased security in their current working practices and in their retirement. That is why the hon. Member for Chippenham was absolutely right—dare I say it?—to bang on about this and to call for a detailed review at the next stages. I would strongly support that. That issue needs to be tackled because of the changing nature of the workplace.

Thirdly, as stated earlier, the advent of auto-enrolment has increased the number of workers saving for retirement, with more active savers now in defined contribution pension schemes rather than defined benefit schemes. While the overall trend toward a greater number of savers is positive, we do not want to see a growing threat posed to DB schemes. It was never intended that auto-enrolment should become a bolthole for employers seeking to move away from historic DB schemes. Indeed, I thought what the Minister said yesterday to the TUC conference was absolutely right—he said that DB is working well notwithstanding a whole number of problems, and that where employers can, they should continue with their responsibilities. I strongly agree with him.

Fourthly, the rise in the number of pension savers is a step in the right direction, but DC plans must continue to evolve in order to provide savers with an adequate pension. A report by the Pensions Policy Institute in 2016 found that the median saving of DC scheme members could yield only £3,000 per year as an annuity, which is not a lot of money. That therefore demands action at the next stages and on a whole number of fronts: more work, for example, needs to be done to improve the adequacy of returns on DC savings, including looking in greater depth at costs and charges. On the 8% target, it is clear that, for the current proposed automatic contributions—I stress again that they are a welcome step in the right direction—8% should not be the summit of our ambition as we look ahead over the years to come. I take the point from the hon. Member for Chippenham that we should get the balance right so that we do not impose unreasonable burdens as we progressively move forward. However, I stress again that 8% should not be the summit of our ambitions.

On how one might have the best possible DC arrangements, there is an interesting debate going on around collective defined contribution pension schemes and what is being proposed by both Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union. We have been engaged in constructive discussions with the Government on opening the door for such arrangements to be introduced at the next stages. However welcome it is, I stress again that 8% is not enough, and we therefore need to look at several things, including transparency, costs and all those things that would make a difference.

More workers having access to a pension pot is welcome, but I refer to what my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) said earlier: it is vital that there is greater knowledge about pensions. To that end, the Government have the opportunity, through the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill, which is welcome, to increase the provision for financial education.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I was hoping to allow the Minister about 10 minutes in which to speak.

Jack Dromey: In which case I will finish in about 90 seconds. Financial education is at the heart of that Bill, which is welcome. The role of the new single financial guidance body will also be important.

Auto-enrolment has been positive for the workplace pensions landscape in this country. It needs extending and improving—of that there is no doubt—to give...
workers greater security in retirement, but it is a strong and welcome step in the right direction, and it is deeply welcome that there is cross-party consensus.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I am delighted to respond to the important and timely debate introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan). She is right that this is the first time that this important issue has been debated in this Parliament since its introduction many years ago. This is an opportunity for us to air a variety of suggestions and ideas, which I will take on board. If I cannot address all the points she raised, I will definitely reply to her in writing.

It was kind of my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) to describe me in the way he did. It is a rare day that a Conservative Minister gets a good report from the Trades Union Congress, where I spoke yesterday. My only thought as I was listening to his speech was that things can only go down from here. It is also the case that, while I take all the compliments on the work we do as a Department—it is a team game, as any Minister will say—it is patently clear that the Chief Whip should, would he wish to replace me at any stage, have available a number of capable personalities who have auditioned impressively today in their speeches.

We are considering auto-enrolment following the Government review in December 2017. I pay appropriate thanks to all the many people who contributed to it. It is certainly the case that we should start with unequivocal support for the hundreds of employers that have all made an amazing contribution. There are 1,250 in Amber Valley, 990 in East Renfrewshire, 1,860 in Horsham, 1,330 in Preseli Pembrokeshire and 1,590 in Chippenham. They have effectively been part of the change of the contract that exists between employee and employer. In my respectful view, that is utterly key going forward.

That new contract, much as we see in relation to the living wage, sees a change in the employee-employer relationship, and we need to make the case that the employer pays in when an individual pays in. More particularly, I believe it has led to greater staff loyalty, greater retention and greater commitment to those businesses. We should support and applaud that on an ongoing basis.

It is an amazingly exciting time for me to have been given this job. It is one that I asked for, and the Prime Minister kindly added financial inclusion to my ministerial title. It is clear that the Government are committed to all aspects of financial inclusion and addressing debt advice and pensions guidance, whether that is through making pensions simpler, more accessible and increasingly transparent through the pensions dashboard; or providing improved debt advice, pensions guidance and breathing space, and cracking down on cold calling, which we are doing through the single financial guidance body, which is being created by the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill, which will return for debate in the House in approximately 10 days; or pioneering the mid-life MOT and the developments in auto enrolments.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) made several points. I briefly say that the independent review of the pensions system she requested was done by the Government in March 2017—John Cridland very kindly did it. It included looking at life expectancy. Pensioner poverty has also reduced significantly under successive Governments, to give credit where it is due. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) made the fair point that the Labour party would like a consistency of approach. This is an example of that and, with respect, the raising of the state pension age from 1993 onwards is an example of consistent pensions policy across all parties.

More than 1 million employers are now successfully providing workplace pensions. It is a good time to take stock, because we are seeing the end of the first phase of our reforms as we go forward into the second phase and bringing on board newly created businesses into our growing economy. There will be approximately 180,000 to 210,000 new employers each year that will need to comply with automatic enrolment duties. They will very much receive assistance from the Government and the independent Pensions Regulator in taking forward that process.

I make it very clear—I say this in every speech that I give—that we need to change the way in which this country views savings, pensions and investments. We need a situation in which we are unequivocally supportive of enhanced savings, pensions and investments. Auto-enrolment will clearly make a massive difference, and the rises that we will see will clearly make a massive difference to savings.

In the limited time I have, I will try to address some of the crucial points that have been raised. Much was said about why we are delaying the implementation of reforms, whether it is the lowering of the lower earnings limit or the £10,000 limit, until the mid-2020s. I take the strong view that it is my job, helping the Secretary of State and No.10, to ensure that the April 2018 and the April 2019 increases land without a hitch. They are the most important things that the auto-enrolment review identified and, more particularly, that we need to get right.

Provided we get those two increases right, we can then assess where we are. We can then allow for the lessons to be learned and push on to further phases. On phasing, it is entirely right, as everybody has said on a cross-party basis, that 8% is not sufficient to retire. We all accept and realise that. The Government are crystal clear that it is not the end of the matter. We wish to continue with the April ’18 and April ’19 increases, and once we have done those, we will assess where we go thereafter. Hon. Members should be under no doubt that there is an acceptance in all parts of Government that 8% is not sufficient for a long-term retirement. There are various examples from around the world. Australia is several years ahead of us, and has pushed into double figures. That is clearly the direction of travel in which we will go at some stage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham raised several questions, and I will try briefly to answer some of them. I have a couple of quick points on the self-employed. NEST has a public service obligation to ensure that employers always have a scheme available for automatic enrolment. That now applies to the self-employed, who can join NEST itself. The review that identified the significant number of self-employed people—4.8 million—very much made the case that we need to come up with ideas to address that. The pilot projects we are putting forward aim to do exactly that. As my hon. Friend will be aware, NEST is pioneering the sidecar product.

I meet a number of private sector providers. I will shortly meet Plum, and there are others—to use a BBC expression,
alternative providers are available. Clearly, Moneybox, Plum and Chip, and all these very interesting private sector providers that give alternative savings options, can be utilised. We are looking at such companies with great interest.

More importantly than that, we are trying to be immensely proactive. There will be the self-employed hackathon. If the invite to that has not landed in colleagues’ inboxes as yet, they should come on 26 March when, working with the Association of British Insurers at its offices, we will explore ways forward and the assistance we can give to the self-employed. There is absolutely no doubt that we want to do that.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Ms Buck in the Chair

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Freedom of Religion or Belief

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move, That this House has considered freedom of religion or belief.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. This debate is specifically about how the UK Government can work to advance the right of freedom of religion or belief at the 37th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council. It is a pleasure to speak on these issues. I thank all the hon. and right hon. Members who have taken the time to come on a Thursday afternoon. There are lots of reasons to say, “No, I cannot be here.” I was speaking at the Christian Solidarity Worldwide event on Wednesday, and I reminded people that there would be snow on Thursday. I said, “Maybe the snow will keep you here.” I said that graciously—I do not want to keep Members for anything but the right reason—but there were Members who had to go home early and Members who were unable to get home and so have come. We are pleased that everyone has made the time to be here. I thank you, Ms Buck, for chairing this debate, and we look forward to significant and helpful contributions from all Members.

I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, which speaks on behalf of those with Christian belief, those with other beliefs and those with no belief. I am also the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Pakistani minorities. I want to put those two things on record before we start the debate.

I thank Members for participating in this important debate and for continuing to speak out. Every Member here has spoken out on behalf of those who are persecuted for their religion or belief. I also put on record my thanks, in anticipation, to the Minister. We know how much commitment he has for these issues. He is a Minister who will respond to our requests to him in the way that every Member believes in their hearts that he would. It is pleasing to see the shadow Minister in his place. We know he has the heart for this issue, and we look forward to his significant contribution. I look forward to hearing the comments of other Members on how the Government will address the UN Human Rights Council session, which kicked off on Monday. We are having this debate today because we want to send our comments to that session. Hopefully the participation we have in Westminster Hall today will go into the heart of Government.

As most Members in the Chamber will know, the UN Human Rights Council is responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights. At each session of the UNHRC, member states come together to discuss human rights violations, give them international attention and make recommendations. We will use the debate to highlight issues that we hope can then feed into the UN human rights commission, which is also meeting. That is why I am very thankful for the opportunity to have this debate, so that Members can raise freedom of religious or belief issues with the Government, and so that the issues can be brought to the UN and given the international attention they desperately deserve.

As Members will know, I have campaigned for many years to raise freedom of religion or belief issues in my role as chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. I hope to discuss some of those issues in the hope that it will help the Minister and his team to advance the right to FORB at the UN Human Rights Council. As the debate unfolds and as people participate and make contributions, we will form a joint opinion of what we want among all the parties here, the shadow Minister and the Minister, and that will go up into the heart of Government.

I want to speak about five issues; other Members will speak about others. They are: the mass violence of armed Fulani Muslim herdsmen in their conflict with Christian farmers in Nigeria; the criminalisation of blasphemy and religious conversion in Nepal; the continued state-sponsored persecution of the Bahá’ís in Iran; forced conversion in Pakistan; and abuses of freedom of religion by the Eritrean state and the ongoing imprisonment of Patriarch Abune Antonios—given my Ulster Scots accent, I hope that sounded as it should.

Sessions of the UNHRC represent an excellent opportunity to increase international attention on an issue, so it would be remiss of me not to use this debate to shine a light on the growing violence of armed Muslim Fulani herdsmen in their conflict with Christian farmers in Nigeria. Since 2001, climate change, over-population and extremist religious interpretations have combined to cause mass violence between those two groups in Nigeria’s middle belt. Despite rarely being discussed in the media, the global terrorism index estimates that up to 60,000 people have been killed in the conflict since it began 17 years ago. Hundreds of thousands have been displaced, and thousands of villages, churches, mosques, livestock and businesses have been destroyed, at great cost to local and state economies.

There is no doubt that violence has been committed by actors on both sides of the conflict, but the Fulani herdsmen militia, armed with sophisticated weaponry including AK-47s, is thought to have murdered more men, women and children in 2015 and 2016 than Boko Haram. We all know how cruel, brutal and violent Boko Haram is. In 2014, it was recognised by the global terrorism index as the fourth deadliest terrorist group in the world. The scale of the violence is unprecedented. At the federal and state level, the Nigerian Government have long failed to respond adequately.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I declare that I, too, am a member of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. I am most concerned about what is happening in Nigeria because I do not think we know how many people in the country have been displaced by the violence. It is largely unsung in the press, but having looked at it, I would estimate that at least 50,000 or 60,000 people are displaced for religious reasons within Nigeria.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and his membership of the all-party group. He is there, as we all are, for the same purpose: to try to
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make lives better and to fight—not physically, but verbally and emotionally—for those across the world who are persecuted.

The Nigerian Government have developed neither early-warning systems nor rapid response mechanisms to violence, and the federal police are rarely deployed. That worries me. Actors on the ground, who spoke with the US Commission on International Religious Freedom universally reported that when the police are deployed, they stick to main roads and do not venture into more rural areas where the violence occurs. If they do not go where the violence is and try to stop it, it does not work. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the problem. As Nigeria is a member of the UNHRC, I hope that the Minister and his team will urge the Nigerian Government to do more to defend their citizens. I hope the Minister will offer support to help them do just that.

I will now discuss the situation with freedom of religion or belief in Nepal, which is also a member of the UNHRC. As the Minister knows, article 26(3) of the Nepalese constitution prohibits "any act or conduct that may jeopardise another’s religion” or “convert another person from one religion to another”.

On 8 August 2017, the Nepalese Parliament passed a criminal code Bill that strengthens those constitutional restrictions and outlines significant criminal penalties for offenders. In other words, it is another level of persecution, this time legal. The Bill greatly threatens the rights of religious minorities in Nepal, as the broad definition of the criminal code’s provisions means they can be applied to legitimate expressions of religion or belief. For example, the charitable activities of religious groups or speaking about one’s faith could be considered to be attempts to convert another person. The wording of the Bill is also similar to the wording of blasphemy laws in neighbouring countries, which have been widely misused to settle personal scores, to target religious minorities and to further extremist agendas. The introduction of the Bill is concerning for advocates of human rights and freedom of religion or belief.

What is even more concerning is that the Bill was signed into law on the very same day that Nepal was elected to be a member of the UN Human Rights Council. On Nepal’s appointment to the UNHRC, its permanent representative to the United Nations said: “This election offers post-conflict Nepal an unprecedented opportunity to prove its worth as an international contributor to the cause of human rights in Nepal and around the world.”

I challenge Nepal to prove to the world that what it is saying in words will happen, because the legal position in Nepal at the moment is contrary to the UN Human Rights Council and what it says. I hope, as I am sure everybody in the room does, that Nepal intends to take this opportunity. I hope that we will challenge Nepal, and that it will change its laws on blasphemy and religious conversion. Nepal’s new role means that it is even more important that the country takes protecting the rights of religious minorities seriously.

It is also important to remember that between 2014 and 2020, the Department for International Development will spend approximately £600 million in Nepal. The UK Government thus have significant influence, through which they can encourage the Nepalese Government to promote freedom of religious belief, not in words, but with action. I ask that the UK Government use that influence, and hold bilateral meetings with Nepalese representatives at the United Nations Human Rights Council, to encourage Nepal to live up to its obligations as a member of the UNHRC.

Another area of grave concern for those who take an interest in human rights and religious freedom is the plight of the Baha’i community in Iran. We have some people in the Gallery today who are here to represent the Baha’is, and we are here to represent them as Members of Parliament and from a legal point of view. The Baha’is in Iran continue to face systematic, state-sponsored persecution. This session of the UNHRC happens to fall during the second cycle of the universal periodic review of Iran’s human rights record. As part of the review, many UNHRC countries have made recommendations to Iran on how it could improve its treatment of the Baha’i community. Those recommendations have covered detention, access to education, access to employment and non-discrimination in legislation. I am sad to say, however, that it seems that none of them has been implemented, which is frustrating.

Moreover, since the election of Dr Hassan Rouhani as President in 2013, ostensibly on a reformist agenda, more than 150 Baha’is have been arrested. As of January 2018, 77 Baha’is were imprisoned because of their beliefs, and more than 30,000 pieces of anti-Baha’i propaganda have been disseminated in the Iranian media. We are here today to speak for the Baha’is and to reassure them. They are people whom we will probably never meet, but we meet their representatives.

I understand that the UK Government are likely to co-sponsor and support a resolution on human rights in Iran at this session of the UNHRC. Perhaps the Minister will be kind enough to confirm that? I certainly would welcome it, and I look forward to that confirmation. The resolution, if adopted, would renew the mandate of the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, a post previously held by the late Asma Jahangir. I should like to return to the tragic and untimely passing of Mrs Jahangir later.

Given the sad absence of a report from the special rapporteur on Iran at this session, would the Government kindly consider making a statement during the interactive dialogue on Iran, referencing the dire situation of the Baha’is in that country? Of course, many serious violations of human rights require attention, but I suggest that a statement on Iran is needed to emphasise the intensification of abuses against Iran’s unrecognised Baha’i minority. If people cannot access education, either at secondary or higher level, are unable to own a business or a house, cannot access healthcare, and do not have freedom of religious belief, something needs to be done. The treatment of the Baha’is can, in many ways, be seen as a litmus test for Iran’s sincerity on wider questions of human rights progress.

Another vital issue that I would like to raise is forced conversion and marriage in Pakistan. Pakistani non-governmental organisations, such as the Movement for Solidarity and Peace, have estimated that at least 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam, and forcibly married or sold into prostitution annually in Pakistan. I cannot begin to understand what has happened to those young girls.
The horror and brutality that they go through is unbelievable, and must be recognised by the Government at the UNHRC.

As the Minister will no doubt be aware, Pakistan had a universal periodic review of its human rights record in November 2017. As part of that process, Pakistan received and accepted three recommendations about tackling forced conversion and forced marriage. Pakistan accepted that something has to be done, which is a welcome development, but there are concerns that the recommendations will not be pursued. I am aware of situations in the past where recommendations have been made and no progress has followed, which is unfortunate. I do not want just a verbal confirmation that Pakistan will do something: I want to see actions, because actions are better than words.

In November 2016, the Sindh provincial assembly unanimously passed a Bill against forced religious conversions. The Bill was sent to the governor for approval, but in January 2017 he refused, citing concerns raised by religious scholars and political parties that the clauses were against the teachings of Islam. Such pressure has also impeded the establishment of a national council for minorities’ rights. In 2014, the supreme court ordered the Government of Pakistan to set up such a body to monitor cases of violence and persecution against minorities. The court also ordered the establishment of a special police force to protect minorities and their places of worship. As far as I am aware, those two recommendations have not been pursued. I am aware of situations in the past where recommendations have been made and no progress has followed, which is unfortunate. I do not want just a verbal confirmation that Pakistan will do something: I want to see actions, because actions are better than words.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, and I concur with everything that he is saying. Earlier this week, I met with Cecil, who was here with Christian Solidarity Worldwide. I was moved by some of the stories he told me about his own kids’ experiences at school of censorship in the things that they are taught. The important thing to put on record is that we are not asking for a leg-up; we are just asking for equality, particularly for the Christian faith. It is really disappointing that Pakistan is not adhering to that. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that DFID has a role to play here? Some of these books are paid for by international aid money. It is concerning that DFID has a role to play here.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I had the opportunity to meet the gentleman to whom he refers, and I agree that his stories were heart-rending. No one could fail to be moved by what he told us.

Finally, during this month’s UNHRC session there will be a specific interactive dialogue on the human rights situation in Eritrea. The UK can contribute to that dialogue by raising the Eritrean Government’s continued abuse of FORB. That abuse was highlighted in 2016, when the UN commission of inquiry on human rights released a report, concluding that the Eritrean Government perceive freedom of religion as a threat, and that there are reasonable grounds to believe that they have committed crimes against humanity. If we believe that—and that belief has an evidential basis—we need to do something.

In Eritrea, there are only a handful of recognised religious organisations, and people who practise unregistered religions face fines and imprisonment, often without charge or trial. Estimates of the number of religious prisoners in Eritrea vary, but it is thought that there are between 1,000 and 3,000 prisoners. Reports of the torture and inhumane treatment of those prisoners are, sadly, only too frequent. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, prisoners have been held in metal shipping containers, underground cells, and in the open air, in desert areas surrounded by barbed wire or thorns.

Even the recognised religions are tightly controlled by the state in Eritrea. Abune Antonios, the patriarch of the recognised Orthodox Church, was deposed and replaced roughly 10 years ago. He has been under house arrest since that time. Here we are 10 years later, having been unable to persuade the Eritrean authorities to release him. Antonios was reportedly released in 2017, appearing at a mass in July following an alleged reconciliation with the Eritrean Government. It is widely believed that his tightly managed appearance was aimed at convincing the international community that the human rights situation in Eritrea was improving and, more significantly, at convincing the Eritrean people that the division caused by the patriarch’s removal was over—paving the way for a pro-Government successor. After his reappearance, the patriarch was returned to house arrest. He has not been seen since.

Will the Minister urge the Eritrean Government to release Patriarch Antonios and the prisoners of conscience detained unlawfully simply because of their beliefs? I also suggest that he encourages the Eritrean Government to extend invitations to relevant UN representatives, enabling them to conduct unhindered, thorough, independent and impartial human rights investigations?

To sum up, FORB is a fundamental human right. Tragically, countless people worldwide are suffering because of its denial. In Nigeria, armed violence by Fulani herdsmen has taken the lives of countless innocent people. In Nepal, the Government’s laws threaten the freedom of religious minorities. In Iran, the Bahá’í community is oppressed by the state, and at every level in Eritrea, holy men and peaceful believers wind up unlawfully imprisoned. In Pakistan, thousands of young girls are taken from their homes and married off to men against their will. Those are just a few examples of FORB violations across the world.

I believe it is our duty as parliamentarians to speak out for those who have no voice, those who are suffering and neglected and those who want to live their lives in peace—those who just want to worship their God in the way that they want. The 37th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council offers an excellent opportunity to help those vulnerable people, and I ask that the Government raise these issues at this month’s session. During the dialogue with the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, I ask that the Government repeat their stated commitment to FORB. I know the Minister will do that, but will he give us the assurance that it will go to the next stage, to protect the lives of persecuted religious minorities?

Will the Minister also share the steps that he has taken to advance FORB with his counterparts at the UNHRC, and encourage them to take such measures
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as well? That would be helpful for the debate, and to reassure those in Westminster Hall, in the audience and those watching outside.

Before I finish—this is one of those “finally and penultimately” moments, but I am getting there—I hope hon. Members will not mind if I say a few words about the late Asma Jahangir, the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran. Her name is familiar to many human rights activists and will be familiar to many in this room. She was a lawyer and campaigner, who co-founded and chaired the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. She suffered imprisonment and house arrest for her support for democracy and human rights, but her resilience and capabilities saw her become the first woman to serve on Pakistan’s Supreme Court Bar Association. She was a strong defender of human rights in Pakistan and spoke out against violence against women, a position that exposed her to serious threats. At the international level, she was called to serve the United Nations human rights machinery in three roles, first as the UN special rapporteur on extra-judicial executions, then as special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and finally as special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, a post she held until her death last month on 11 February, aged only 66. Speaking as someone who is close to 66, that is a young age—I am not that close, but I am going that way.

Pakistan has lost one of its most courageous daughters, the United Nations has lost one of its most effective human rights defenders and many people of faith and campaigners for religious freedom and for women’s rights have lost a friend. She will be mourned in prayers by many communities. I hope that in our debate today in this House we are paying some tribute to Asma Jahangir’s work and her contribution to human rights.

In conclusion, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to bring this subject forward for debate and I thank all hon. Members for coming to participate. I look forward very much to the responses from the shadow Minister and the Minister. Today, in this House, we can be the voice for the voiceless across the world.

1.52 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I compliment the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on his exceptional speech, which was a tour de force of some of the issues that the Government need to address. He mentioned the situation in Nigeria, Nepal, Iran, Pakistan and Eritrea.

We have to keep making the case for freedom of religion and belief. We must not take it for granted. With the indulgence of colleagues, I would like to make that case, speaking personally from the experience of my faith group. Many colleagues will know that I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Last summer, quite a few hon. and right hon. Members attended performances of the British Mormon pageant, a musical drama depicting the arrival of the first Mormon missionaries in Great Britain in 1837 and the story of the first British converts and their faith. It was performed by a cast of hundreds of volunteer actors and musicians in the grounds of the Mormon temple in Chorley.

The story of the Mormons is a very British one. At one time there were more Mormons in England than in Salt Lake City, and the British influence on the Church is evident to this day. For example, a singing group of early Welsh Mormon converts became the world-famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

When the first missionaries arrived in England in 1837, they travelled to Preston from Liverpool, where one of the missionaries had family. When they stepped off the coach from Liverpool, they found themselves in the middle of an election meeting in Preston market square—Preston was unusual at that time because the franchise was wider than the norm. They were greeted with the unfurling of an election banner that read, “Truth will prevail.” That is a very appropriate theme this afternoon.

The early missionaries took that as a good sign for the work that they were about to commence, but the early members of the Church were subjected to persistent and organised violent persecution. Prophet Joseph Smith, the first president of the Church, was assassinated, and the Mormon pioneers were eventually driven out of the United States. Led by Brigham Young, a latter-day Moses, they established their Zion, a city of refuge in the mountain west, which is Salt Lake City today.

The Church has 13 articles of faith, one of which reads:

“We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience and allow all men the same privilege. Let them worship how, where and what they may.”

Given the history and the origins of my Church and its earliest adherents, Members will understand that freedom to live in peace according to one’s beliefs and conscience, devoid of offence towards others, is a matter of deeply felt importance to me.

Today, more than at any time past, none of us can ignore the global and regional importance of religion to politics, conflict resolution, economic development, humanitarian relief and more. Some 84% of the world’s population identifies with a religion, yet 77% of the world’s inhabitants live in countries with high or very high restrictions on religious belief.

Article 18 of the United Nations declaration of human rights says:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change one’s religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one’s religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

In its latest annual report, Open Doors attempts to rank the countries that are the worst persecutors of religious minorities. It has been described as a “Who’s Who” of intolerance, brutality and fear. There is a top 10 of countries that are described as practising extreme persecution of religious minorities: North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan, Eritrea, Libya, Iraq, Yemen and Iran.

The report also makes the point that all faiths endure persecution, but Christians are among those who suffer the most. My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) made the point as lately as yesterday, in questions to the Department for International Development, that we should dedicate a fixed proportion of international aid to tackling religious persecution. I support that. The United Kingdom should take a lead
and set an example. We have at least some influence over countries on that list I read from the Open Doors report.

If we in this Parliament do not commit to defending the rights of all people to tend to their own soul in whatever way they see fit, who exactly do we expect to step forward and fulfil that role and responsibility for us? While it is right that we should approach human rights from a legalistic point of view, we should also be concerned about the spiritual welfare of those who are denied the freedom to exercise their conscience. Our determination to be the defenders of freedom of religion and belief should shape how we interact with other societies and how we bring our global influence to bear.

The plight of the Baha’i community in Iran is appalling. Knowing members of the Baha’i community here in the United Kingdom and recognising their gentle and engaging nature, I find their plight tremendously upsetting. Their situation has not been unnoticed by the international community. The United Nations universal periodic review is a mechanism by which all UN members have their human rights records scrutinised by their peers. The Chilean Government, who conducted a review of Iranian human rights, said that Iran should adopt provisions to prevent all forms of discrimination against women and girls and, in particular, to promote access to higher education for members of the Baha’i community and other religious minorities. The Iranian Government accepted that recommendation, but it has not been followed through and the Baha’i religious minority in Iran continues to have limited access to higher education. It remains official policy in Iran to deny members of the Baha’i faith access to higher education. Iranian policy states:

“They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Baha’is.”

In other words, students who have a minority point of view are expelled.

The Iranian Government have failed to live up to their commitment to remove discrimination from education, and continue to expel Baha’i students from Iranian universities. I ask the Minister to consider whether the UK mission to the Human Rights Council in Geneva should at the very least make a clear statement about the plight of the Baha’i community in Iran specifically about the denial of access to higher education. All Governments have a responsibility to deliver on the promise of religious freedom, and to protect the freedom to worship and the basic tenet of the free exercise of conscience.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is speaking very powerfully about Iran’s persecution of the Baha’i community, which I have raised with Ministers previously. It is widely known that a secret police service in Iran monitors Christians. I implore the Minister to raise that with Iranian authorities. The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point, and we should not shirk from holding Iran to account on this very serious issue.

Stephen Kerr: I am very grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, and I endorse what he said.

All people—those of faith and those of no particular faith—should observe the laws and respect the culture of the country of which they are citizens or residents.

Freedom and respect for law and order are two sides of the same coin. There is a strong correlation between how laws are framed and held inviolate so that individuals are permitted the free exercise of conscience, and the peace and prosperity that societies enjoy. Although we largely enjoy freedom of religion and belief in our country, Parliament and parliamentarians should be alert to the constant need to protect that fragile and precious privilege.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making some very powerful points. At a briefing in the other place last week, I learned that, in a lot of the refugee camps near Syria and in other parts of the middle east where there is a war situation, Christians, Sunnis or Shi’as—in other words, people who have a different religious perspective from that of the majority—either pretend to be something they are not or stay outside, which is very unsafe, because their fear is so extreme. Although I am proud of what we do to support refugees in that situation, does the hon. Gentleman agree that our Government must say that responsibility comes with the funding that we give?

Stephen Kerr: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and endorse what he said. Conditions should be attached to the support we give. I, too, feel tremendous pride in UK aid and what it does in refugee camps, but minority groups must not be excluded.

The lessons of history teach us that there can be awful consequences if the majority becomes insensitive to, and apathetic about, the rights and privileges of conscience and choice of even the smallest minority. Freedom of religion is the right to choose, change, declare and act upon one’s faith. It includes the freedom to worship, but it is much more than that. It is the right to exercise or practise one’s religion without Government interference.

Religious freedom, including our freedom to act according to our conscience within the law, protects the space we all need to live our lives according to our beliefs and values. An assault on that freedom is an assault on our basic ability to live as we choose and be who we are openly and freely without hindrance. All people—those of faith and those of none—have a stake in protecting religious freedom for that reason. Fairness is never easy. It does not just happen. We must be aware of how we interact with each other, even on a casual basis. That approach runs counter to a troubling tendency, perhaps most evident on social media, for the attributes of people of faith to be reduced to nothing more than a caricature of their beliefs. A “fairness for all” approach goes beyond that. It asks people to try to understand the concerns and needs of others, even if they disagree with them. Most of the time, people with whom we disagree have sincerely held beliefs and a reasonable basis for holding them. We must respect each other.

Religion, especially in an environment of respect, strengthens the social fabric of society. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks said that religion

“remains the most powerful community builder the world has known...Religion is the best antidote to the individualism of the consumer age. The idea that society can do without it flies in the face of history”.

The Prophet Mohammed said:

“None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.”
[Stephen Kerr]

We should commit ourselves consistently to apply the principle of selfless love for our fellow human beings. We should seek to improve ourselves as individuals and our society in the exercise of the United Kingdom’s influence as a global power.

2.6 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): One of the borders of my constituency is the largest mosque in western Europe. Unveiled across its entrance is a welcoming banner that reads “Love for all, hatred for none”. The mosque can accommodate an incredible 10,000 worshippers, so it is no wonder that there is a thriving Ahmadiyya Muslim community in my constituency.

The Ahmadi community identifies as Muslim, but does not believe that Mohammed was the final Prophet sent to guide mankind. Not only does freedom of religion evade the Ahmadi, but they are actively persecuted across the world, including in the UK. I would like to take hon. Members on a global tour, from Africa to Asia, and from Greater London to Glasgow.

Algerian Ahmadi live in fear and are denied fundamental human rights, contrary to the guarantees offered by the Algerian constitution. Between the summers of 2016 and 2017, 280 Ahmadi Muslims across Algeria were arrested due to their faith. In Egypt, the Interior Minister, Mr Magdy Abdel Ghaffar, issued arrest warrants earlier this year for at least 25 Ahmadi Muslims, following which the Ahmadi publications secretary, Ahmed Elkhatib, was arrested after a raid on his home.

In Burundi, 13 young Ahmadies were arrested earlier this year. They were attending a religious education class at a mosque in Bujumbura city when it was raided by the secret service. I am pleased to hear that that situation has now been resolved, although it should never have occurred in the first place. In Indonesia, Ahmadi mosques have been burned down, some Ahmadies have been denied voting rights and the right to marry, and many have been driven out of their homes.

I could go on, but the persecution is happening right here on our doorstep. In Glasgow in 2016, Ahmadi shopkeeper Asad Shah was murdered by an extremist. During the police investigation, officers claimed that the incident was “religiously prejudiced”. In Waltham Forest, Muslim members of the Waltham Forest communities forum actively stopped an Ahmadi Muslim being re-elected in October 2017, stating that he could not be a representative of Islam.

The country I want to focus on today is Pakistan, which is home to an estimated 4 million Ahmadies. Across the country, they are actively targeted by the state on the grounds of their faith. In 1984, under General Zia, the Government of Pakistan made it a criminal offence for Ahmadies to call themselves Muslims, to refer to their faith as Islam, or even to preach or propagate their faith. Since that year 259 Ahmadies have been killed, and 183 assaulted for their faith; 84 mosques have been demolished, sealed, burnt or forcibly occupied, and 52 banned from construction; and 65 Ahmadies have been denied burial in a Muslim cemetery. Yet Pakistan is a country where people have a constitutional right to freedom of religion.

In order to vote in the forthcoming elections, Ahmadis must either sign a declaration that they do not belong to the Ahmadi community, or acquiesce to their status as non-Muslims. What is more, that separate electoral list for Ahmadis is published and publicly available. On Monday, the High Court in Islamabad ordered Pakistan’s national citizenship authority to provide detailed information on an estimated 10,000 Pakistani citizens who are believed to have changed their religion from Islam to Ahmadiyya. No wonder Ahmadis face such widespread persecution.

In October 2017 Captain Muhammad Safdar, the son-in-law of Pakistan’s former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, gave a hate-filled speech in the National Assembly, encouraging all public authorities, including the judiciary, to oust the Ahmadiyya Muslim community from all aspects of life in Pakistan. The following day three Ahmadis were sentenced to death on spurious charges. In December I received an extremely concerning report that Captain Safdar was visiting the UK. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, I wrote immediately to the Home Secretary. Twelve weeks later I received a quite remarkable response from UK Visas and Immigration:

“In order to safeguard an individual’s personal information and comply with the Data Protection Act 1992, we are limited in what information we can provide when the request is made by someone who is not the applicant. We are therefore unable to provide you with information about Captain Safdar without his written consent.”

Let me make that clear. As a Member of Parliament, representing hundreds of Ahmadis in my constituency, owing to data protection I was unable to receive confirmation that a member of the National Assembly of Pakistan who had just made a hate-filled speech against the Ahmadi community was entering the UK. I ask the Minister, in whose interest is it for the data protection of that man to be considered more important than the protection of the Ahmadi community as a whole?

Freedom of religion is one of our most fundamental human rights. It is an indispensable pillar of the freedom of communities and societies worldwide. The case of the Ahmadi community globally proves that it should not be taken for granted because, when it is denied, the consequence to life can be threatening.

2.13 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the subject of freedom of religion or belief. I was going to speak about three countries, Nepal, Egypt and our own, but the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who spoke so eloquently at the start of the debate, has already discussed Nepal, so I will limit my speech to just two countries.

I want to highlight the latest position for those of religious minorities and atheists in Egypt. At the end of last year, a 35-year-old man told the news agency Al-Monitor:

“Atheists in Egypt are afraid to publicly come out as such. If you proclaim yourself a nonbeliever, you literally open the gates of hell; you stand to lose many of your friends and will be treated like an outcast. Your own family may accuse you of mental illness and possibly disown you. We are being forced to live as hypocrites for fear of facing discrimination and harassment.”

He also said that the situation was getting worse.
A number of recent cases back up that claim. In December, Egyptian security forces arrested Ibrahim Khalil, a 29-year-old computer science graduate, who prosecutors at the Dokki police station interrogated for five hours on accusations of “defaming religion” and “administering a Facebook page that promotes atheism”. He was ordered to be detained pending further investigation. The Egyptian Parliament has recently been discussing a Bill to criminalise atheism, classifying it as contempt of religion, which is punishable by up to five years in prison under Egyptian law.

I encourage the UK Government to seek to persuade the Egyptian Government to end discriminatory and restrictive policies, including legislation banning atheism and minority faith groups, as well as legislation restricting church construction, and processes that make registration of conversion challenging. I am pleased to see the Minister for Asia and the Pacific, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field), in his place today because he has taken a genuine personal interest in this subject over many years. I am confident that he will refer it to his Foreign and Commonwealth Office colleagues, who I know have previously expressed concern about the situation in Egypt.

I must also mention, once again, attacks on Coptic Christian churches in Egypt. Most recently, over the past 12 months, more than 100 Christians have been killed, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide. I commend the work of CSW, in particular its recent publication, “Faith and a Future: Discrimination on the Basis of Religion or Belief in Education”, launched at the CSW meeting earlier this week in this place, which a number of us attended. If the Minister has not received a copy, I hope he will accept mine, because it contains many recommendations.

Turning back to the position of Christians in Egypt, in April last year, attacks on two churches killed 44 and left scores injured. In May, at least 28 people were killed and 23 injured when masked gunmen opened fire on three vehicles transporting members of the Coptic community to the St Samuel the Confessor monastery. In October, an extremist attacked Father Samaan Shahata Rizkallah, a 50-year-old Coptic Orthodox priest, chasing him, stabbing him repeatedly in the head, neck and abdomen with a meat cleaver, and imprinting a cross on his forehead. Father Samaan died from his injuries. In December, in the Helwan neighbourhood south of Cairo, a gunman attacked a Coptic-owned shop, killing two brothers. Later that day, the same gunman attempted to storm Mar Mina church, killing members of the congregation and a police officer at the checkpoint guarding the church. Several others were wounded. The gunman was endeavouring to enter the church to detonate explosives, but fortunately was intercepted and arrested.

These are incidents, the like of which we have heard time and again in Egypt over recent years. I implore the Minister and the UK Government to call on the Egyptian Government to ensure that all such attacks are thoroughly investigated. Will the Government encourage the Egyptian Government to ensure that the measures put in place to combat terrorism do not violate human rights, including freedoms of association, expression and religion or belief?

Given that, I want to reflect on how and why the UK should lead on matters of religious freedom. I want to express concern about freedom of religion or belief in our own country. In more than seven years in this place, I have spoken many times, including in this Chamber, about challenges to religious freedom in other countries. I have to confess, however, that while I was preparing for this debate I was in some trepidation about speaking about the subject with reference to our own country—I thought I might be seen as somewhat out of kilter with what we call the “mood of the room”. So it was with some relief that I heard other Members speaking about their concerns about challenges to freedom of religion or belief in this country. I am therefore somewhat surprised, but ironically also very pleased, that I appear to be echoing concerns already expressed by colleagues relatively early in the debate. As has been said, we cannot credibly ask other countries to pursue religious freedom diligently if we do not do so ourselves.

Our former, well-respected colleague, who spoke many times about this subject, David Burrowes, the former MP for Enfield, Southgate, told me today about a meeting that he and the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) held with an Iranian parliamentary delegation in the last Parliament. David Burrowes challenged that delegation on human rights issues in their country, including the persecution of Christians. They challenged back, picking up on abuses in this country, and in effect said, “Put your own house in order before you criticise us.”

Precious religious freedoms have been hard won in this country over centuries by many, including free church Christians, Catholics and Jewish people. As the recent publication, “Turn the Tide: Reclaiming Religious Freedoms in the UK”, reminds us:

“The very first clause of Magna Carta includes the statement...The English Church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired”.

That is one of only four of the Magna Carta’s 63 clauses that remain part of the English law. It ends:

“This freedom we shall observe ourselves, and desire to be observed in good faith...in perpetuity.”

From the 16th century, Britain led the world in developing those freedoms, spreading them to other countries round the globe. Many died to achieve those freedoms; others were imprisoned or exiled, or had to leave the country; others were denied an education, not allowed to hold jobs in the public sector or stand for Parliament, simply because of their faith. William Tyndale gave his life so that the Bible could be freely read in England. John Bunyan, author of “The Pilgrim’s Progress”, spent 12 years in Bedford County Gaol for the right to preach and worship freely.

The hard-won freedom of religion is under attack in the UK today, whether unintentionally by those who lack religious literacy, more deliberately from aggressive secularists, through attacks by one faith on another, or simply by those who ridicule people of faith in the 21st century. Those people are ridiculing our Queen and our Prime Minister, both of whom have very publicly declared faith. We hear of British adults who were raised in one religion and converted to Christianity being subjected to extraordinary abuse, including physical violence. One from the north of England wrote to his MP about his family’s troubles. He said:

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“We were forced out of our...home after...several years of suffering as converts...in the form of persecution which entailed assault, daily intimidation, criminal damage to property: smashing house windows and also 3 vehicles written off”.

In fact, the empty house next to them was set on fire, in the hope that the fire would spread to their property. Eventually, the family was moved out under armed police protection to a new home elsewhere in the country.

Two street preachers were arrested and prosecuted in 2017 for peaceably preaching from the Bible—we know that they were peaceable because there was a film of the event. A Crown prosecution lawyer suggested at the court hearing that publicly quoting from the Bible should be considered a criminal offence. The street preachers were fined but later acquitted on appeal to the Crown court. Their case is seriously disturbing. The fact that the police and Crown Prosecution Service decided to prosecute the men simply for publicly reading the Bible challenges the long-established freedom in this country to do that. That was one of the very first aspects of freedom of religion to be established, when in 1537 Henry VIII issued a royal decree to that effect.

As I have mentioned, that was the freedom that William Tyndale died for in 1536.

Let it be said and heard in this Parliament that reading the Bible in public is not a criminal offence in this country in the 21st century. The case I have mentioned appears to have resulted from a misunderstanding of the law by public officials, but such instances are deeply troubling, and we in this place, who value freedom of speech so preciously, need to be more keenly aware of it and call it out. I am not saying that every complaint of religious discrimination we hear is justified—sometimes we might not hear the whole story—but there have been enough instances in recent years to cause us concern.

Parliamentary colleagues in this room may remember the assault that took place against the Brethren denomination just a few years ago, when the Charity Commission sought to remove its charitable status. I remember more than 40 MPs crowding into this very room to raise objection after objection. More recently, we have had to combat the suggestion—again in this very room—from the Government, that churches running more than six to eight hours of Sunday school or youth clubs each week should have to register with the authorities and be monitored by Ofsted for the content of their teaching. That suggestion would have turned the clock back two centuries in terms of religious freedom in this country. I sincerely hope that, as there has been no public announcement on that proposal, the Government have quietly dropped it.

Even more recently, there has been a suggestion that those wanting to hold public office should have to swear an oath supporting a currently undefined set of 21st-century British values. That harks back to my earlier reference to people being barred from public office because of their religious beliefs. Great work was done through the 18th and 19th centuries to remove such barriers to people becoming school teachers, Army officers, lawyers, mayors, or students or academics at Oxford or Cambridge Universities. Drawing up a new set of beliefs that people have to sign up to could take us back to the 17th century, and attempts to draw one up have been troubled. Although most things on such a list would be universal values, not necessarily everything would be. If the Government are still considering that suggestion, I urge them to reconsider it and to withdraw it.

The issue of freedom of religion, belief and expression in our country merits much further attention. Government need to ensure that UK laws that target violent extremism do so precisely and do not impinge on the religious freedoms of peaceable citizens, whose faith often motivates them to contribute very positively to society. To that end, Government should consider requiring officials to include religious belief in the equalities impact assessment, along with the current criteria of race, disability and gender, to ensure protection from discrimination. After all, religious belief is also a protected characteristic.

It would be beneficial for Government to look at ways to improve religious literacy across Departments and public officials. As suggested in the report, “Improving Religious Literacy”, published in 2017 by the all-party parliamentary group on religious education, which I have the privilege of chairing, that is being done in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development. I very much welcome that recent work, but it needs to be done more widely. If we are to be coherent and carry integrity internationally, religious freedom in this country must be nurtured, manifested and supported as well as it is abroad.

2.28 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend—I hope I can call him that—the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on opening this debate in the 18th and 19th centuries to remove such barriers to people becoming school teachers, Army officers, lawyers, mayors, or students or academics at Oxford or Cambridge Universities. Drawing up a new set of beliefs that people very briefly and another state, India, in slightly more depth—something I am sure he is not surprised by. In the light of some of the situations faced by Christians in India, specifically Roman Catholics, I hope that the Minister, perhaps via the papal nuncio, will feed back to the Holy See that, in its deliberations with the People’s Republic of China to overcome some of their disagreements over the last 70 years, it might reflect on how the Roman Catholic faith survived the tyranny of western communism and how it should deal with the practice of Roman Catholicism in its connections with eastern Communism. Undermining the underground Roman Catholic Church in any fashion would be a retrograde step, not just for those practising their faith in the Roman Catholic fashion but for all people of faith in the People’s Republic of China.

I turn to the situation in India. The Republic of India, the world’s largest democracy, has a legal system based on common law, is a signatory to many UN declarations, including on human rights, and is a Commonwealth nation. I hope that the Government, through the Foreign Secretary, will raise a few points
with President Modi and his officials at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in London in April.

According to some reports, appallingly, India has risen from the 28th most dangerous country in which to practise the Christian faith to the 11th. Christianity in India is not some modern belief flown in from the United States mid-west, but finds its roots in the Christianity of St Thomas the apostle between, some would say, the birth of Christianity and the 6th century. Yet well-known people in the state of India continue to call publicly for the country to be free of Christians by 2021. So far, there have been 23,000 incidents of physical and mental abuse against Christians of all denominations, and 635,000 Christians have reportedly been detained without trial or unfairly arrested. That is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of Christianity.

We should not forget the situation of Sikhs in India. Those in the Sikh community make up the largest proportion of the Indian diaspora in Scotland. Let us not confuse the expression of Sikh faith and its persecution in India with the authentic debate about self-determination. There should be no doubt that the Sikh community faces profound discrimination and intolerance in the practice of its faith. The number of Sikhs detained for very long periods by state authorities continues to rise across all the states that make up the Indian nation. That is a matter not only for those who practise the Sikh faith in India, but for every UK citizen—including many constituents of Members here—who wishes to travel to the Punjab to visit holy sites and/or their families.

Since the detention without charge of my constituent, Jagtar Singh Johal of Dumbarton, members of the Sikh community across the UK have become gravely concerned that they, too, may be detained on the simple premise of being a member of the Sikh faith. To travel to a Commonwealth nation in a situation like that is quite profound. I will therefore ask some specific questions of the Minister for the Government to consider.

First, when President Modi attends the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in April, what discussions will the UK Government have with the Government of India about the persecution of Christians? Secondly, what discussions will the UK Government have with the Government of India on the persecution of those of the Sikh faith? Thirdly, how will the Minister use the responses to his letters to heads of mission about freedom of religion or belief? How will those responses inform Foreign and Commonwealth Office policy, and how will the FCO encourage heads of mission to ensure that their diplomatic staff are trained to spot and resolve freedom of religion or belief violations? Finally, will the Government ask other Commonwealth nations in April what actions they are taking to build a more tolerant society, where religious belief is not only legislated for but defended?

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We should congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on how he introduced the debate and his work over many years to highlight these issues. I have joined him in many debates over the years. As usual, he spoke up in a powerful and noble way. I am grateful to all those who spoke before me, and I adopt all their points. I do not disagree with anything anyone said.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) rightly described the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims. I was astonished by the reaction of the Iranian parliamentary delegation to this country that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) mentioned. I agree that there are examples of politically correct magistrates and police officers being over-zealous in dealing with Bible preachers, and everything she said was right, but to equate that with a criminal regime in Iran that hangs and persecutes people and treats minorities with complete contempt is ridiculous. When we speak out, we should attack the really evil regimes around the world. There are forces for good that are trying to resolve difficult cases.

I say to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) that the papal nuncio has visited Parliament. We have been talking to him and to our ambassador to the Holy See in the past week, and the all-party group on the Holy See is going to the Vatican. The situation with the underground Church in China is unbelievably complex, but there is no question of the Catholic Church deserting those brave people. We hope some sort of compromise or consensus can be achieved with the Chinese Government.

The honest truth is that the people who are persecuted in the world are overwhelmingly either Christians or members of minority Muslim communities who are persecuted by majority Muslim communities. There are of course very bad examples of discrimination by Christians, but I hope that the Minister will not use the usual rather easy Foreign Office line that there is persecution everywhere in the world. I agree that there is persecution in too many parts of the world, and all persecution is terrible, but the people whose lives are made a complete and utter misery and who are overtly oppressed are overwhelmingly either Christians or members of minority Muslim groups.

We are going to stand up one by one and attack various Governments for persecuting people, so let me start with a good news story from Israel. Recently, the Israeli Parliament considered a private Member’s Bill that would have granted expansive powers to confiscate church property in Jerusalem. Astonishingly, it would have allowed the municipality to confiscate even properties that had previously been sold by church bodies. Such ex post facto laws are almost unheard of in Israeli jurisprudence. Indeed, traditionally, Christian communities have been protected in Israel.

The Christian community in the holy city united in protest and even closed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for the first time in decades. Luckily, the Knesset suspended its consideration of the Bill, but the Israeli Prime Minister’s role in having it stopped is noteworthy. He stepped in, as The Jerusalem Post reported:

“Netanyahu became involved after it became clear that the closure of the church had the potential to cause Israeli considerable diplomatic damage”.

Our Government should take heed. Diplomacy can work, and Her Majesty’s Government should not be afraid to protest or condemn, even when our close friends are involved.

Let me deal with one aspect of the persecution of Christians. There is a Christian Solidarity Worldwide briefing many pages long from which one could take numerous examples, but I want to deal with the persecution of Christians in the Nineveh plains of northern Iraq,
mainly because I know the region and have visited it. All but one of the Christian villages I visited in the Assyrian plain near Mosul were overrun. The Iraqi Christian population numbered more than 1.4 million in the 1980s, before our disastrous invasion of Iraq. By mid-2015 it had declined to 275,000, and it had further declined to 200,000 by last year.

The Syriac Orthodox patriarch, Ignatius Aphrem II, told the recent Budapest international conference on persecuted Christians:

“I am afraid the day will come when our visitors come to see us as dummies in a museum, placed in old churches or monasteries. I fear that, in failure of the necessary steps, we may only become memories of the past in a very short time.”

If one goes to ancient Christian communities in the middle east, one hears the mass said in Aramaic, which is the language of Jesus Christ—the original language. However, we should listen to what the Syriac Orthodox patriarch said about Christians being driven out of the foundation place of Christianity.

The situation is not entirely hopeless. Many refugees who were only internally displaced have tried to move home and rebuild their communities.

I recently received a memorandum on the current status of Christians in northern Iraq from a member of the senior leadership of the Christian Church community in northern Iraq. I have met this gentleman and talked to him at length, but for security reasons I cannot give his name, because he is resident in the region. The fact I cannot do that, as he is scared for his safety if I read out his testimony, says something about the problems we face. Anyway, our friend in Iraq writes:

“The displaced Christians from the historically Christian towns of the Nineveh plain are in the midst of a gradual, often halting, return to their homelands. Of the 100,000 Christians originally displaced from the region, approximately 30,000 to 40,000 have begun efforts to move back. Of these, many have also still retained some form of residence in greater Irbil region, where they took refuge during their displaced status. As such, there is continual movement back and forth between greater Irbil and the slowly rebuilding towns of Nineveh.”

However, he goes on to point out that there has been almost no return of Christians to Mosul, because of justified fears for their safety in the city. I went to Mosul and saw the Christian communities there before ISIL—because of the appalling events there, nobody in their right mind would have gone anywhere near that city in recent times. Because of the security concerns there, Mosul’s Christians remain displaced. They cannot return home and rebuild their lives, and they cannot help Iraq return to some sense of normality and stability. Our correspondent notes that they

“are dependent largely upon the resources of the Christian churches and aid groups.”

Again, not all is hopeless; there are signs of progress. I am relieved to hear that the United Nations Development Programme has changed its previous policy and is now starting to work more closely with Church leadership in Nineveh, which provides almost the only real local government in the area. Hungary has been strong in its work in this field: in addition to appointing an ambassador-at-large for persecuted Christians, it has donated €2 million to help reconstruction in the villages of the Nineveh plain.

What can we do? How can the United Kingdom help? I turn to the Minister. Our friend on the ground in northern Iraq has given me concrete suggestions, which I put to the Minister and to which I hope he might respond. First, the UK Government need to put pressure on the leaders of the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central Government in Baghdad to resolve their disputes peacefully and swiftly. That is an easy ask, Minister, but it may be more difficult to achieve. The travel blockade that prohibits international air travel to Irbil is particularly debilitating and has had a disastrous effect on humanitarian relief and reconstruction efforts.

Secondly, we need to encourage the Iraqi Government to remove all paramilitary forces from the Nineveh plain and replace them with regular Iraqi army and security forces. The Hashd al-Shaabi units there are mostly Shi’a from southern Iraq, with Iranian backing, and their continued presence adds to uncertainty and insecurity about the future. Thirdly and finally, our Department for International Development needs to examine closely as a potential model the new co-operative relationship building between the United States Agency for International Development and the UNDP.

Our friend on the ground notes:

“In particular, we need to examine the structural forms of co-operation and co-ordination which are ensuring that practical and efficient working relationships are being established in which the Christian minorities are properly involved in the rehabilitation process. DFID should not be allowed to simply provide boilerplate representations regarding the effectiveness of the prior UNDP programs which the UN itself has admitted need to show greater responsiveness to the reality on the ground, a reality in which the Christian churches continue to provide the de facto local government leadership in their region.”

My correspondent cites the example of the $55 million donated by USAID being deployed around the Nineveh plain in a co-ordinated approach, with close contact between the office of the UNDP director for Arab States and the Christian leadership in northern Iraq. He notes:

“This new approach has shown great early promise at improving efficient use of aid funding, and has significantly improved the confidence of the Christian minorities in the UNDP efforts.”

Yes, 3,557 houses have been burnt down, 13,088 houses have been severely damaged, 8,297 have been partly damaged, and reconstruction is very slow. We can be guilty of exacerbating these appalling problems because of our previous foreign policy. I do not want to go on about that—oceans of ink have been spilt on whether it was right to invade Iraq and to destabilise Saddam, Assad or Gaddafi—but all I will say, as I have said before, is that, in our perfectly justifiable attempts to improve democracy and undermine authoritarian regimes in these countries, we have unleashed totalitarian forces, and the victims of those forces have been the minority Christian communities. I hope the Minister will forgive me if I dwelt at some length on northern Iraq, but it is one of the most horrible, most pitiable and most terrible parts of the world.

2.46 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate, his wide-ranging speech and indeed his overall commitment to religious
freedom. The contributions of all hon. Members have shown how important it is to remain vigilant about attacks on religious freedom, whether in this country or elsewhere.

I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Baha’i faith. On numerous occasions, together with other hon. Members, I have raised the plight and persecution of the Baha’is in Iran. However, today I draw attention to a disturbing development: the persecution of Baha’is in Yemen, driven by Iran. I speak specifically of the case of Mr Hamed bin Haydara, a Yemeni Baha’i sentenced to death by public execution by a Houthi-controlled court in Sana’a on 2 January. The persecution of the Baha’i community in Yemen is a recent, extremely disturbing development, and Mr bin Haydara’s case is a graphic illustration of a growing problem, which is a matter of great concern.

Mr bin Haydara is a 54-year-old father of three who has been detained since 3 December 2013. He was first arrested by the national security agency in Sana’a. In the early months of his detention, he was subject to torture, beatings and electric shocks, and he was forced to sign documents while blindfolded. He was detained without charge for 13 months until January 2015, when he was charged with collaboration with the State of Israel, apostasy and harming the political status of the Republic of Yemen. The prosecutor sought the death penalty. More than half of the 38 court hearings in his trial were postponed or cancelled, and the death sentence was pronounced in his absence. That must raise questions of due process, even in the troubled country of Yemen.

The Baha’i community has reported that six other members of its community are detained in Houthi-controlled prisons and that arrest warrants were issued for a further 25 Baha’is, so there are fears of a wider crackdown on the Yemeni Baha’i community. It appears that elements of the national security agency and the prosecution service in Sana’a are determined to persecute them.

The memorandum of the Iranian supreme revolutionary cultural council in 1991 dealt with the Baha’i question. It stated:

“A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country.”

It is believed that that policy is now being enacted in Yemen. Indeed, it is deeply disturbing to hear the analysis of the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, who on 22 May 2017 observed:

“The recent escalation in the persistent pattern of persecution of the Baha’i community in Sana’a mirrors the persecution suffered by the Baha’is living in Iran”.

In view of the gravity of the threat to the life of Hamed bin Haydara and the steadily increasing oppression of the innocent Baha’i community in Yemen, particularly in those areas under the control of the Houthis, will the Minister request that the UK mission speak under agenda item 10 of this 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council on the situation of Yemeni Baha’is? Will the UK mission also inquire specifically about Mr bin Haydara’s case and that of other Yemeni Baha’is during the interactive dialogue with the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed? Of course, it is he who has already drawn attention to the plight of the Baha’is in Yemen and the concerns he feels about that.

Those are just two steps that could and should be taken to raise the plight of the Baha’is in Yemen. We must not let them down, and I hope the Minister can give me a positive response to both requests.

2.51 pm
Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is a real pleasure to be here to support my very good friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I endorse what other people have said about his conviction and his drive to bring this matter to public attention.

I want to make a slight change from the way other people have spoken. I want to talk about what I have seen as a witness to religious-inspired genocide, particularly between Bosnian Croats, who are Catholics, and Bosnian Muslims, sometimes called Bosniaks. Both sides are ethnically exactly the same; they are South Slav peoples. The only difference is religion.

In 1992-93, I was the British United Nations commander in Bosnia. During my time, I found evidence of atrocities before April 1993, but nothing like what I found on 22 April 1993. That day, I was in the hills on the instructions of the European Community Monitoring Mission ambassador, trying to stop the fighting between Bosnian Muslim and Bosnian Croat forces. I was on the frontlines, and a Bosnian Muslim commander said to me, “You know, we’re not stopping fighting, because our people are being killed by them over there, and they’ve been killed in large numbers in a village called Ahmici.” I said, “I don’t believe it.” They said, “They are.” I said, “Look, if I go there and I discover you’re wrong, and I come back and tell you that you’re wrong, will you take my word for it and stop the fighting?” It was a sort of trade-off.

They said yes, so I left there and went off the hills. My men and I were attacked a couple of times by snipers. We bypassed a Croat special forces unit that opened fire on us and we went into the village called Ahmici. As I entered, I saw the mosque at the entrance had had its minaret toppled—not a good sign. I drove all the way up to the top of the linear village, about a mile. As I passed through it, I saw such devastation that I could not believe it. There were some houses still standing; they had crosses on the door, marked in paint. Everything else was destroyed.

At the end of the village I deployed a platoon of men—let us say 36—either side of the road, in straight lines, and we went through. I was looking to see whether I could find anyone. We did not find anyone; we saw dead animals, but we did not find anyone until about one third of the way down the village. We came across a house, and my men came back to me and said, “This is disgusting, sir, absolutely disgusting.”

We went to the house, and in the doorway were the remains of a man and a teenage boy. They were burned, and they were shot—there were shell cases on the floor—but we did not find anyone until about one third of the way down the village. We came across a house, and my men came back to me and said, “This is disgusting, sir, absolutely disgusting.”

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they were not, but they were shot. There was a mother, back arched, and there were children. My men and I came out retching.

I had no idea what to do. I could not talk about it, I could not do anything, I was there in a neutral capacity, but I had to do something, because this was religious genocide. It was disgusting, and we had to do something about it—not just talk about it, not just report it. We were on the ground, but what could I do? I did not have enough men. What could I do? Who would I attack?

Then I thought, “The best way of dealing with this is to publicise it right across the world.” So I called a press conference beside my tank. I accused the Bosnian Croats directly of causing the massacre, because the houses with the crosses on were Christian Catholic houses, and those that did not have a cross, the Bosnian Muslim houses, were destroyed.

A couple of days later, I buried over 100 people in a mass grave, mainly women and children and old men. As I was coming away, there beside the road I saw a family in line, dead: mother, father, boy of about 10, girl of about six—dead. The girl was holding a puppy. The same bullet that had killed her had killed the puppy. I took the bodies to the local morgue. I took them into the morgue and said, “Please deal with these bodies.” That is not a great job to do; it is horrid.

The next day, I went down the same road to discover that those bodies had been put back where I had found them. Guess why? It was because I had taken them to a Christian morgue, not a Muslim morgue, so they put the bodies back where I had found them. That is appalling.

I have given evidence in five trials as a result of those activities, at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. I knew the commanders on both sides; I had dinner with some of them. On the face of it, they were normal, decent people. I have to ask: is it the same bullet that makes normal, decent people turn to such brutal techniques? How can normal people kill a child, a woman or a man? How can they do that? It seems to me extraordinary.

Obviously, we have never been in that situation, but why is it that the Nazis, for example, who were normal German people, could do that? Why could normal people in Cambodia, or elsewhere, do that, mainly because of religion? Why does it happen in the name of religion? I do not think there is a mainstream religion, because the houses with the crosses on were Christian Catholic houses, and those that did not have a cross, the Bosnian Muslim houses, were destroyed.

I suspect that religion is often used for that reason—to give people an excuse to do what they wanted to do in the first place.

I hope I am wrong, but I now believe that we will never be able to stop religious persecution, not completely. But my God, it is our duty to do everything we can to try.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. It is quite difficult to follow the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). He has provoked a lot of questions on why we think religious freedom is important and why we need to move forward with it and for the Government to do more to support oppressed people.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on persuading the Backbench Business Committee that we needed to have the debate at the time of the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for having been persuaded by him in his inimitable way.

I first heard about the Baha’i faith when I met Mr Dan Wheatley, who is a member of the community here and is a persuasive and strong advocate for that community. I subsequently joined the all-party parliamentary group on the Baha’i faith, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) is the chair. The faith has been spoken about today. It is actually the world’s youngest independent religion. It was started in Iran, and it now has 188 communities around the world, all of which I consider a noble and caring teaching faith. Its teaching includes the oneness of humanity and, particularly, the equality of men and women.

However, like many other faiths that have been spoken about, the Baha’is have suffered periods of violence and oppression, in Iran and beyond, as has been eloquently described. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Iranian Government have persecuted the Baha’is. In 1991, a Government memorandum, prepared at the request of the supreme leader, urged that the community should be treated in such a way that “their progress and development shall be blocked.”

That memorandum, which established Iranian state policy towards the Baha’i community, remains in force. Other hon. Members may be aware of the document and the actions it mandates to repress the Baha’i people. I will focus particularly on one area: restrictions on the right to work. We talk a lot about how important employment is for everybody, not only in the economic but the social sense. A direct result of the memorandum is the Iranian Government’s discriminatory policy to prohibit and restrict the Baha’is’ right to employment—a policy that has been expanded over the years—which has had such an effect on the people in the community.

The hon. Member for Strangford rightly paid tribute to the life of Asma Jahangir, who was the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran at the time of her tragic death last month. In her last report, dated 14 August 2017, she noted:

“Baha’is continue to be systematically discriminated against and targeted, and efforts are afoot to systematically deprive them of the right to a livelihood.”
It is also notable that Iran’s actions are in contravention of a recommendation that it accepted from Sri Lanka at the start of the UNHCR’s last universal period review. Recommendation 138.88 stated that Iran should:

“Continue its national policy to promote equal opportunities and treatment with respect to employment.”

There are many examples of how Iran has failed to implement that recommendation, and I will highlight but a few. On 20 April 2016, 17 shops belonging to Baha’is were sealed for being temporarily closed on Baha’i holy days. Days later, on 28 April, four additional shops in the same province were sealed for the same reason. Later that year, after Baha’i-owned businesses throughout the province, in cities including Sari, Quem Shah and Bandar Abbas, were temporarily closed on 1 and 2 November to observe a Baha’i holy day, Iranian authorities sealed a total of 124 business premises belonging to 132 Baha’is.

Again, in July 2017, 16 Baha’i-owned business premises in Khuzestan province were sealed following the observance of another holy day. It was a small relief that, two months later, after great effort by the business owners, 14 of the sealed business premises were unsealed. In the same month, the business premises of a non-Baha’i in Ahvaz were sealed for employing a Baha’i. The owner of the business was forced to dismiss the employee and, after being provided with an assurance of non-co-operation with the Baha’is, the authorities issued an order to unseal the business. Further, on 1 May, the business premises of 18 business owners in a city were sealed by Amaken—the public places supervision office—again because they were closed on a religious holiday.

For us, it would seem impossible for that to happen in our country. There would be an outcry. But these Iranian citizens, who are simply trying to make a living while staying true to the faith that they have chosen to follow, are being treated in this way. I admire their courage and perseverance. I do not know whether I or anyone else in the room who has never had to suffer for their faith could endure such persecution. I confess that I would never want to be tested to such a degree. We all need to think about how we would deal with persecution and whether we would be able to withstand it for our faith. The people who have been mentioned today, wherever they are, deserve our admiration.

In view of Iran’s failure to adhere to accepted international human rights standards, including commitments that their own Government have made within the framework of the universal periodic review, I urge the Government to continue to support, co-sponsor and lobby for the resolution on human rights in Iran at the Human Rights Council.

Finally, I support the request made by the hon. Member for Strangford that the UK raise the situation of the Baha’is in Iran in an agenda item 4 statement at the UN Human Rights Council, given the sad fact that Asma Jahangir is no longer with us. We are all united in this today. The fact that so many people have turned up on a cold afternoon, perhaps not knowing whether they will get home this evening, shows that we ardently feel that religious freedom should be upheld.

3.12 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon). I extend my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee and also to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. Please note, Sir David, my interest as a member of the all-party group. I want to take a moment to express my deep thanks to the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for sharing his experience as to why this debate today is so fundamentally important.

Human rights are bandied around. They are written and printed, and we speak about them a lot, but today we have heard evidence as to why it is so important that they go beyond words, statements and intentions and become part of what being human and civilised should really be about. Freedom of thought and belief in religion are mentioned in many documents: our own Human Rights Act, the European convention and the UN convention. Those are examples of why, as a civilised world, we can do better for our future. We have heard evidence today from across the world, and indeed from within the United Kingdom, about the great tragedy that people still use others’ religion as a reason to persecute, to be violent towards and to treat differently. They use religion and non-religion—atheism or agnosticism—to say, “You are different enough for me to inflict pain and inhumanity on you,” whether through employment for Baha’is, or through property, approach or education.

As the world seems increasingly separated, we need Governments, individuals and Parliaments to stand up and say, “Together we are stronger.” Together we recognise our differences. We hold that as important in the friendships that we make.

Much has been said about the Baha’is today, and I ask to be associated with the comments that we have heard, but I want to ask about Yemen, where recent changes show the potential for another truly tragic part of history to roll out. We have an opportunity. The situation is complex and there are never simple answers, but there is a simple basis: differences in religion are never a reason for treating people differently.

I want to ask the Minister about an event that happened on 21 February when the UNHCR representative was here. I had the privilege of listening to him submit evidence about what is happening. A number of points were made that I want to raise today, which I want the Minister to take away and in due course respond to. The first relates to a statement that I have read in various places, which is that people of minority religious faiths choose not to go to refugee camps. It seems there is an obvious explanation, but I am not sure whether that is correct. I heard the UNHCR representative say that it was by choice and that the majority of refugees are not in camps.

It is important that the Government look into whether the statistics and the explanation are correct, particularly in relation to the number of refugees from minority faiths that are settled in the United Kingdom. There seems to be a difference in the percentages. It is horrible to reduce people who have refugee status to a statistic, but there seems to be a much smaller number of religious minority refugees settled in this country than perhaps there are in other parts of Europe and across the world. It might be a choice that those individuals and families make, which is fine, but I find that anomaly somewhat worrying.

The second thing relates to some of the recommendations made, particularly with regard to the Government’s role in relation to the UNHCR and the process of assessing
vulnerability and protective needs and providing humanitarian assistance to refugees. The characteristics of vulnerability are gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, and the language of refugees. Will the Minister comment on how much work is being done to establish religion as one of those areas of vulnerability? It seems to get raised. It is certainly within the documentation, but there needs to be an assessment of how strongly religion forms one of the characteristics of vulnerability.

My next point relates to the training that UNHCR staff get on religious persecution and the safeguarding of religious minority refugees. This country and the Government can be justifiably proud of the knowledge that sits within their Departments, and the world can only benefit by its being shared. It would be nice to know that that is being rolled out to support the UNHCR in various other areas.

We have heard some enormously powerful testimony today. The right to practise a religion or to practise no religion is a fundamental part of being a human being. There are complex questions and complex situations, but no simple answers. Using the power of communication, politics and diplomacy, we need to take our place in the world and strive to ensure that in future the powerful testimony that we have heard today can be consigned to history and we can learn to live together.

3.19 pm

Martyn Day (Linthgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir David. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing time for this important debate. I pay tribute to his work as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and the effort that he has put into it over the years.

We have had a consensual debate. I do not think I have disagreed with any point made by any Member. That speaks for the strength of feeling across the House. We live in a world where about 80% of people identify with a religion, so freedom of thought and religious belief is a fundamental human right. No one should be persecuted for practising their religion. Yet religious persecution is growing across the world. It is therefore more important than ever that we should stand up to protect that freedom of religion and belief. That freedom includes the right to hold no faith. The issue truly affects everyone.

Earlier this week I had the pleasure of meeting Cecil Chaudhry, of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, who I see is with us today. We discussed the work of the commission in Pakistan and the growth in the incidence of blasphemy cases against religious minorities in the past 30 years. An area of concern that Cecil brought to my attention was bias against religious minorities within the curriculum taught in schools in Pakistan. He furnished me with a book, “Education: the Sole Hope for Change”. I briefly read it over last night, and would be more than happy to pass it to the Minister if he has not seen it already. A number of colleagues have pointed out the influence that the UK can have through its aid policy. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) made similar points, and I echo that view. Hopefully we may get action in this case.

When we last debated freedom of religion and belief, for International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day in October, I listed a huge range of issues that constituents had raised with me. I will not repeat a similar list today, but the House can rest assured that there has been no let-up in the interest in the issue from people in my area. Those issues echo the points hon. Members have made today, and I shall not rehearse the same arguments, but there is an important observation to be made: my constituents do not show simply tribal interest. It is not a case of Christians complaining about Christian persecution and Muslims complaining about Muslim persecution, but instead it is decent citizens complaining about worldwide oppression. I think that there is something we can take from that. They may be influenced by their own belief, as is the case for many of those who have spoken in the debate.

In a similar vein, I am pleased to note the positive steps being taken in Scotland, and particularly the work of local ecumenical groups in my constituency, whose very existence fosters an attitude of openness and discussion. At a time when churchgoing has been in steep and steady decline throughout these islands, it may seem that, at least in the case of Christian belief and practice, its days are numbered here. However, a closer look at the situation on the ground in Scotland reveals that there are still signs of proactive attempts by faith-based communities and organisations to stem the secular tide and exercise the important human right of religious freedom that we are debating today.

As an example of that, large-scale preparations are currently under way by churches in and around central Scotland to host an ambitious three-day series of stadium events this summer at the grounds of Falkirk football club, on the border of my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (John McNally). It is billed as the Central Scotland Celebration of Hope, and there is an inclusive invitation to everyone who wishes to come. The family-friendly concerts are free of charge and are scheduled to take place on 15, 16 and 17 June, and will be fronted by the American preacher, Will Graham. The rallies at Falkirk stadium follow a successful, smaller outreach that he conducted in Peterhead two years ago, and will include live performances by Christian artists from around the world.

Will Graham is the grandson of the late Dr Billy Graham, who, of course, passed away last Wednesday, at the age of 99. When Dr Graham first came to Scotland in March and April 1955 to hold Christian rallies in Glasgow’s Kelvin Hall as part of the “Tell Scotland” movement, people from far and wide came to hear him speak, and many others around the country attended corresponding events in churches, and watched live broadcasts relayed by the BBC. The Rev. Tom Allan, chair of the All Scotland Crusade, which co-ordinated the Billy Graham mission activities in 1955, estimated that over a two-month period “a total of 1,185,360 people in Scotland attended meetings of one kind or another”.

The Church of Scotland’s peak national membership of 1.2 million in 1962 has been attributed, in substantial part, to the religious revival that followed Billy Graham’s visit. Congregations from across the denominational spectrum also benefited from a boom in church attendance during that period.
Rev. Will Graham’s upcoming Central Scotland Celebration of Hope is expected to draw large crowds to Falkirk stadium from across the nation and beyond. My colleague, John Swinney MSP, the Deputy First Minister of Scotland, and I are among the civic representatives looking forward to attending that positive local event. As happened at the numerous, high-profile rallies in Scotland for Will’s well-known grandfather, the last of which were held in the stadiums of Pittodrie, Murrayfield and Celtic Park in 1991, there will be live-streaming of the Falkirk stadium event in churches and at other venues around the country and, of course, on the internet for everyone. Perhaps that is an indicator that, far from this being a twilight era for Christianity, there may be another resurgence of spiritual interest just on the horizon.

Often the language we use is important, and we must be careful about inadvertently creating a religiously intolerant society. In this regard, I particularly welcome the term “Celebration of Hope”, which is far more inclusive language than the old expression “crusade” or even “mission”. Sadly, not everyone is as thoughtful, as is highlighted by another local matter I have been dealing with. This time the culprit is the press, and I want to single out the Mail Online in particular. The excellent local family-based group in my area, Al Massar, aims to tackle Islamophobia through a range of community activities such as its local football team, which gives free training, and Eid in the Park, a massive community event in the Falkirk area. It works well with local schools, the council and the NHS on various projects. The group is all about community cohesion, and unfortunately felt compelled to complain about reporting of an event it held at the Scottish Parliament to mark World Hijab Day. I shall not go into the full details of the article, but it contained factual errors, and the phrase “antiquated, oppressive, religious tool”—very negative language, which could very easily fuel Islamophobic rhetoric. I have of course supported the group’s complaint to the Independent Press Standards Organisation.

I am sure that the Minister and other Members will be aware that only one complaint out of over 8,000 about discrimination made to the IPSO has been upheld in the past year. The problem appears to be that the editors’ code of practice relates to “prejudicial or pejorative reference” to an individual, not a group. Surely that needs to be changed. The UK Government’s commitment to religious freedom, here and abroad, has been stated many times in this place. I am broadly in agreement with it, and I hope that the Minister can perhaps help with that point too.

On a positive note, sometimes those in the press are on side of the angels, and are on the receiving side of abuse and intolerance. I want to flag up the case of the journalist David Clegg, of the Daily Record, who gave a statement to the police the other day about threats received following his reporting of neo-Nazis targeting the Muslim Labour politician Anas Sarwar. I am sure that hon. Members will wish to join me in saluting his championing of the contribution made by Scots of all ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Thankfully, I live in, and am proud to represent, a very open and welcoming constituency. There is a clear message from the communities that I serve, and from Scotland as a whole, that we welcome people from diverse cultures and backgrounds, and that Scotland is a truly welcoming and diverse nation. We must seek to develop a religious literacy—a point made by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—that will enable us to engage in constructive intercultural dialogue, and so better understand and live alongside one another. Together we must do all that we can to ensure that the basic human right of freedom of religion and belief is promoted. Today’s consensual debate has been a welcome step in that direction.

3.28 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir David. I join my colleagues in congratulating the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my good friend—I hope he does not mind my calling him that—over many years, who was able to table the debate, and in acknowledging the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us the time this afternoon.

It is rare to have a debate of this kind. It brought hon. and right hon. Members together from across the House in a range of emotional, moving contributions and speeches, in which they spoke as one against discrimination against and persecution of people with or without religious beliefs. It is a rare thing in the House that we come together to fight that discrimination across the world and, indeed, in our own society, so I congratulate my friend the hon. Member for Strangford.

The hon. Gentleman drew our attention to a number of issues across the world, not least in Nigeria, where armed Muslim bands have been persecuting Christian farmers over 17 years. The violence is on an unprecedented scale, and we do not often see it reported in the media here. He also mentioned the threat to religious minorities in Nepal. That really grieves me as a person who has visited Nepal on several occasions and was an observer at the elections there in 2013. It is tragic that it is prepared to introduce new laws on blasphemy and religious conversion and is joining the United Nations Human Rights Council at the very moment when it is being intolerant of religious minorities.

We heard much this afternoon, and not just from the hon. Gentleman, about persecution of the Baha’is in Iran. I certainly join him in asking the Government to make a statement on their views on the persecution of the Baha’is, which happens in both Iran and Yemen, as we heard. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the forced conversions that we have seen, in the media, in Pakistan. I think that he was the only Member to draw attention to the situation with the Eritrean Government, who see freedom of religion as a threat to them and demand that religions be registered in that country.

The hon. Gentleman, very movingly, drew our attention to and rightly praised the UN rapporteur Asma Jahangir, who died on 11 February. It was a really good eulogy, and an appreciation of a woman who has not had the coverage and publicity that she deserved. We will not forget that she was born in Lahore, but her alma mater was the London School of Economics. She was educated, in other words, in this country; we should be very proud of her as well.

We then heard from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who said that we must continuously make the case for religious freedom. He made a passionate
contribution on the basis of his deeply felt personal faith. He also mentioned Iran’s persecution of the Baha’i minority.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) has been absolutely brilliant in upholding the rights of the Ahmadi community, not just in her constituency, where they are well established— their philosophy is, “Love for all, hatred for none”—but throughout this country where Ahmadis have been persecuted and, more importantly, in Pakistan, where they suffer the most appalling abuse and, of course, arbitrary arrest and worse. My hon. Friend is a champion of the rights of the Ahmadi Muslim community, and long may that continue. She has upheld the rights of Ahmadis throughout the world and drawn their situation to the attention of right hon. and hon. Members and the media. I congratulate her on her excellent contribution.

We then heard from my hon. Friend—I hope that she will not mind my calling her that—the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). She and I served together on the Select Committee on International Development. When Members serve on a Select Committee and travel across the world, they get to know one another right across the parties and they grow to respect one another, which is the way it should be.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton has always been a spokesperson not only for her deeply held Christian faith, but for the rights of other religious minorities. She talked about atheists in Egypt and the way they are persecuted. She raised the case of Ibrahim Khalil and said that the Parliament in Cairo is now considering a law to criminalise atheism. That is extraordinary. She raised the repeated attacks on Coptic Christians, and the murder and brutality that they experience. She said that freedom of religion is also under attack in the UK today—perhaps not on the scale seen in other countries, but intolerance is being shown in spite of the right that was declared in Magna Carta all those centuries ago. My hon. Friend’s speech was detailed, well informed and very carefully written.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) told us about religious persecution in China and India. It is very important to remember that in those countries, and despite the fact that India is the largest democracy in the world, there is still religious persecution and on a scale unimaginable in parts of Europe. He said that Christianity is more persecuted in India now than it ever has been. Of course, we must also remember the plight of the Sikhs in Punjab. Many of us represent strong Sikh communities. I recently had the privilege to be in Kerala, where I met a Christian preacher, Dr Paul Chellakumar. I do not think that he will mind my mentioning his name in the House in this debate, because he goes around the villages, small towns and communities in Kerala, preaching the message of the gospel. Kerala is home to the largest minority of Christians in India; many are from a Catholic background. Indeed, I met the Indian Minister of State responsible for tourism, the federal Minister for tourism, whose first name is Alphons, which is not a very Indian name.

We then heard from the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who made it clear that there should be no comparison between Iran’s persecution of religious minorities and any issues that we may have in the UK. Of course, he is absolutely right, but that does not mean that discrimination in the UK should go unnoticed. We should of course draw attention to it, as I am sure he would agree. The hon. Gentleman also talked, with great knowledge and experience, about the persecution of Christians in northern Iraq. He mentioned Mosul. I was in Baghdad just a few days ago with an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation, and we heard even more detail of the appalling destruction of western Mosul—the final town to be taken by Iraqi forces when Daesh was expelled. We were told by the United Nations and by Iraqi interlocutors that the destruction in western Mosul is now worse than the destruction in Dresden during the second world war, and that there are more than 30,000 IEDs—improved explosive devices—unexploded, undetonated. Many of them are attached not just to the rubble, but to the corpses within that rubble. The UN estimates that it will take 10 years to clear the rubble away. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned, of course, the Christians of Nineveh. We heard a great deal about them on our visit to Baghdad.

Then we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), who does such brilliant work chairing the all-party parliamentary group on the Baha’i faith and has drawn attention over and over again to the persecution of Baha’is not just in Iran but, as she told us, in Yemen. She told us about the case of Hamed bin Haydara. I dare say that that is not a unique case, but it is one that we really need our Government to draw attention to in the Human Rights Council and in all their discussions with Iran and the Yemenis, as well as with the UN. Iran, she said, calls this the Baha’i question. I just say to Members: where have we heard that before? Substitute the word “Jewish” for “Baha’i”, and we know what we are talking about there. I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent contribution.

Then we were all hushed into total silence by, and paid great attention to, the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). We have heard his contributions on many occasions and we know his background and the bravery and leadership that he showed when he was the British commander of UN forces in Bosnia from 1992 to 1993. That is the thing that most people know about him, but I had never heard, and I am not sure that other hon. Members ever had, the story, the description, of the slaughter in that village, which obviously so profoundly affected him and which he called religious genocide. I thank him for that contribution. It behoves all of us to listen to that history and try to learn the lessons of it. We must do all we can to eliminate the bigotry of religious genocide. It is truly shocking, even all these years later. I thank him very much for reminding us.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Tynside (Mary Glindon) talked about the Baha’i faith being the world’s newest and founded in Iran, and said that Iran continues to persecute Baha’is and prohibit them from one of the most inalienable rights of all people, which is the right to work, the right to earn a living, the right to have dignity in work.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) talked about the need for Governments and Parliaments to say, “Together, we are stronger,” and to remember what is happening in Yemen. He said that of course there are no simple answers, but differences in religion should never be an excuse for treating people differently. I am sure that we can all agree with that.
This debate, as has already been said, is timed to coincide with the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council, which is being held from 26 February to 23 March. The United Kingdom, as we know, is party to the international covenant on civil and political rights, and article 9 of the European convention on human rights, which is part of the Human Rights Act 1998 and protects freedom of religion or belief.

The number of countries that regulate religious symbols, literature or broadcasting has increased dramatically over the last 20 years and religious persecution has increased since 2000, globally and really disturbingly. I think it useful to quote again from article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

It does not protect someone’s religion or belief from being subject to adverse comments or insults. Article 9 of the European convention adds:

“Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

That could, perhaps, be taken both ways. I hope not. We have seen that violation of freedom of religion and belief is a global issue. Some 80% of the world’s population now live in countries with high or very high levels of restriction and hostility towards certain beliefs. That has to be changed.

I would like to turn to a couple of areas that have not been covered in detail this afternoon. First, the situation in Myanmar—Burma—and the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims. They are the world’s most persecuted minority. They have been denied citizenship in that country since 1982 and are thus effectively stateless. Human Rights Watch has called the violence against the Rohingya “ethnic cleansing”. More than half of the Rohingya population of Myanmar—1.2 million in total—have fled the country, mainly to Bangladesh, during this current wave of violence. I know that the Minister is doing all he can and he has made statements in the House accordingly. I know the Foreign Office is deeply concerned. I hope it will work even harder. It will certainly have the Opposition’s support in anything it can do to try to stop the violence and help the Rohingyas.

In China, article 36 of the Chinese constitution states that Chinese citizens “enjoy freedom of religious belief.”

It bans discrimination based on religion and forbids state organs or individuals to compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any particular faith. However, the state recognises only five religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam and Protestantism. Clearly, it does not recognise Judaism, although I do not think there are many Jews in China. Chinese authorities tightly control religious activity, as we know. However, they tightly control it even further for the Uyghur Muslim community in the province of Xinjiang. The state also monitors the Tibetan Buddhists in the Tibetan autonomous region, as they call it, to quell dissent, because they regard Tibetans as a threat to the state. That is a cause I have been involved in over many years. China also calls the Falun Gong, which has not been mentioned this afternoon, a cult, and thousands of Falun Gong practitioners have been sent to jail since 2015. We have heard, of course, about the organ harvesting that they claim is being practised against them.

In Bangladesh, the constitution protects religious freedom and equality for all. Yet the Government of Bangladesh have been criticised for not tackling adequately the increasing Muslim extremism that is targeting the Hindu and Christian minority. I hope the Minister will mention that in his summing up.

We have heard a great deal about Iran, but of course the number of the Baha’i community in Iran is now up to 300,000, although nobody knows truly how many Baha’is live in Iran. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on the Baha’i faith, knows more than I do about that.

We have not heard about Saudi Arabia—one of the most intolerant countries in the world—where apostasy, the act of conversion to another faith, is punishable by death, as is the case in Iran. In Egypt, as has been mentioned, Copts have been targeted, often by Muslim extremists, with the suicide bombings of churches and religious meetings, and the Government continue to restrict the building of churches. I will not even talk about Daesh, because I want to leave the Minister enough time to answer all the points that have been made.

In winding up, I want to draw attention to a couple more areas. One is the general persecution of Christians. We have heard about Christian persecution in many countries, including Egypt and Pakistan. Christians are also persecuted in North Korea and, as we have heard, in Nigeria and Eritrea. We have also talked about Nepal, which has criminalised Christian conversion and evangelism. We have not mentioned Jehovah’s Witnesses, who are banned in Russia, as the Government consider them an extremist organisation. Many of us may have our doubts about Jehovah’s Witnesses, but I would not call them a terrorist or extremist organisation.

In the United Kingdom, according to data released by the Community Security Trust, the number of anti-Semitic incidents has risen by more than one third to record levels in 2016. According to the London Metropolitan police, the number of hate crimes against Muslims has increased from 343 incidents in 2013 to 1,260 in 2016. The Casey review highlighted that in 2015, polling showed that at least 55% of the general public believe there is a fundamental clash between Islam and the values of British society. That is something that we in this House can change together, if we are so minded.

Finally, let me quote the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin). She said:

“All our partners carry out comprehensive vulnerability assessments to ensure aid”—

that we give from the United Kingdom—

“is reaching those most in need, including those from religious minorities as it is already recognised that religion may be a factor in causing vulnerability.”

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s 2017 report, “Freedom of Religion or Belief Toolkit” states that

“it is in the interest of the UK to help people to enjoy freedom of religion or belief and to end discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief.”
3.47 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): It is a pleasure to be here, Sir David. I am delighted to represent the Government in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on bringing this to the attention of the House—one again. [Laughter.] Joking aside, it is an enduringly important issue, not least, as has been mentioned, as we are in the midst of the 37th UN Human Rights Council.

I will touch on a number of points. First, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and all members of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. Their tireless work and commitment to religious freedoms is not just important, but assists the Government in making their case. Every time I am abroad, as a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, I can make the point that this is a big priority for Parliament, so this work is of considerable diplomatic importance. I apologise in advance if I fail to deal with one or two specific points. I will try to ensure that I write to colleagues.

The hon. Gentleman knows that his passion ties closely with my own instincts, which for 16 of the last 17 years were also held from the Back Benches. I contributed to many debates like this before I became a Minister. As he kindly pointed out, I have tried to use my ministerial office to make something of a difference to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s approach.

I was reproached by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). It was slightly tongue in cheek, but there is a level of seriousness about this. He will appreciate that we need to make the case for religious freedom across religions. I take the view of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) that we need to make the case more robustly—I will try to do so in the months and years ahead—that those who choose not to have a religion should not face prejudice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough is right, to a large extent, that there are some specific Christian issues. Those he raised about Iraq are absolutely terrible. As he rightly points out, for some 1,600, 1,700 or 1,800 years there were Christian villages in parts of Iraq and Syria where Christianity has now, I fear, been banished for good. The tragedy is that past totalitarian Governments looked after the interests of minorities—not just Christian minorities, but other religions—better than the new, so-called democratic Governments that have come into play have.

I hope my hon. Friend also recognises that we will, and must, make the case for religions other than Christianity. We are not blind to the fact that there are specific Christian and other minorities. I will do my level best for them, at least in the part of the world where I represent the Government.

I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for doing a fantastic job of summing up the debate. I will not go through that process again—I will try to say new things—but I wish to respond to one or two points.

I say to the hon. Member for Strangford that the UK co-sponsored last year’s resolution on Iran, and will co-sponsor a resolution along those lines again to renew the special rapporteur’s mandate. On Eritrea and the detention of Patriarch Antonios, we have called for his release with the EU and will continue to work at that level. As a Minister, I have found that working with international bodies can make a difference more generally.

I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East for his kind words about Burma. What is happening to the Rohingya at the moment is dreadful. He will recognise that we have to work internationally, but one of our concerns about the UN is that, even at the Security Council resolution level, we run the risk of vetoes from China and Russia. I have to say—one or two of my colleagues had better close their ears while I do—that, in terms of international organisations, it is within the EU that we can make more of a difference. I was in Brussels on Monday and we worked together as EU nations. Of course, we will do so post-March 2019 as well. We often have to work on a multilateral basis in those areas. As the EU 28, we have started down the road towards sanctions against some of the military’s worst elements.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) rightly brought up the Baha’i community in Iran, about which we have repeatedly expressed concerns. We will continue to do so, I hope quite robustly, at the conference that is taking place.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) talked about the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan. I know the mosque to which she referred. Lots of politicians seem to congregate there at election time, but she is a more regular attendee. I fully recognise her concerns and will come on to the specific work that we have done. I am working closely with my colleague, Lord Ahmad, who is an Ahmadiyya himself and, as the hon. Lady knows, was a councillor in Merton before going to the Lords.

My frequent jousting partner, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), alluded to a consular case that we continue to work closely on. He made some profound points about Prime Minister Modi and about Christian and Sikh minorities in India. We will do our best to raise some of those in an appropriate manner at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in mid-April, to ensure that Parliament’s voice is properly heard. He will appreciate that diplomacy sometimes needs to be done behind closed doors, rather than with megaphones. He also made important points about China and the Catholic Church. We will find ways to ensure that those points are addressed to the heads of missions and that we bring them up properly.

I apologise that I had to escape for a quick comfort break in the middle of the speech by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), but I think I heard all her points. On the specific Yemeni case of Mr bin Haydara, we strongly condemn what is happening and are working with international bodies—the EU among others—to raise it directly with the Houthi authorities. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East met the Baha’i community in London on 18 January. I will pass on the hon. Lady’s specific concerns. She will recognise that Yemen and Iran are not my part of the world, as it were, but those issues need to be properly raised.

As everyone remarked upon, my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made a very powerful speech. He rightly reminded us why we should never cease in our efforts to ensure proper freedom of religion and that religion is not used as an excuse for some of the worst aspects of humanity.
The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) spoke about Iran and the Baha’i community, which we are very concerned about. We will continue to express those concerns. I, too, admire its resilience in the most difficult circumstances. We have referred to Christian communities that have been banned after a millennium and a half of being somewhere, but the Baha’i community developed its religious base more recently. One can only admire its resilience.

I will come back to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) about his specific questions—he alluded to the fact that I would need to do that. He made a very thoughtful speech. We would like to get to the bottom of the situation that he rightly raised. We need to look at whether those with avowed religious beliefs are poorly represented among refugees or whether, as is a possibility, many are not expressing religious beliefs because they realise that they are likely to have great difficulty in refugee camps.

I will now turn to my own speech, as I know that other hon. Members want to return home. We in Government will remain committed to promoting and defending the right to freedom of religion or belief around the world, including the freedom to change religion and the right to have no religion at all.

At this point, I will reflect on the incredibly thoughtful speech of the one person I missed out: my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton. She rightly raised issues that are a lot closer to home. If I had one small point of disagreement with her, it would be this: we need to recognise that religious extremism is often the precursor to violence, which comes back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham. Although the Government need to deal with that sensitively, I agree with her that all too often, our rather mealy mouthed political correctness threatens long-standing freedoms of religion.

On the day the Government jettisoned the Leveson inquiry as being a bit too difficult to implement, we might well reflect on her words about the desirability of insisting that politicians sign up to a pre-election pledge of presumably secular values. Like her, I hope we can think again before heading down a path that might have the unintended consequences to which she referred.

I have said this many times before, not least in this House, but it bears repeating. The Government promote freedom of religion not just because it is the right thing to do, or because religion matters to many around the world—some 80% of the world’s population are guided by their faith, according to the Pew Research Centre—but because where that freedom is absent or restricted, intolerance and mistrust can grow. In certain conditions, that mistrust can easily turn to violence and conflict, as has been alluded to.

Societies where people are free to practise their faith are almost always more prosperous and more stable. Evidence also suggests that tolerant societies are better equipped to deal with extremism. However, as we are all too aware, this fundamental freedom is being denied to countless millions across the world. Worse still, some face the most appalling persecution because of their faith or belief.

Our last debate on the subject was on International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day in October, after which my noble Friend the Minister for human rights, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, wrote to British ambassadors and high commissioners around the world about their everyday work promoting freedom of religion or belief. He and I then wrote jointly to British ambassadors and high commissioners across my patch in Asia and the Pacific—for an update on their work on freedom of religion or belief and details of the future work they envisage. Their responses included a number of interesting strategies and activities, many of which are necessarily conducted through discreet, patient diplomacy.

I should like to share briefly with the House some recent examples of what our posts around the world have been doing to promote and defend religious freedom,

first through their bilateral relationships with host Governments and secondly through their project work. I pay tribute to hon. Members, because we have been able to make this case as a result of the pressure they have brought to bear. As a Minister, I feel proud to be able to ensure that so many of our overseas posts are on the front foot when it comes to addressing these issues.

In Nepal, our diplomats have raised and continue to raise our profound concerns about the provision in the new penal code that could be abused to curtail freedom of religion. We shall continue to ensure that its implementation is in line with international standards. Like the hon. Member for Strangford, I am especially displeased that Nepal’s legislation on blasphemy and conversions was being finalised at the very moment that the country was admitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council. I take this opportunity to put on record our concern about that.

We are concerned about the use of blasphemy laws in Indonesia and rising intolerance towards the Ahmadiyya, Shi’a and Christian communities. The UK, along with other EU member states, has made representations to encourage the Indonesian Government to ensure that blasphemy laws are not applied in a discriminatory manner. We have already made such representations in London, and I hope to do so again when I visit Indonesia later this year.

In Uzbekistan, our embassy has increased its engagement with religious communities, including by strengthening its connections with the country’s very diverse Christian denominations and Jewish communities and with Jehovah’s Witnesses, who are struggling to receive permission to worship across the country, as has been discussed. The UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, visited Uzbekistan in October—the first visit from a UN special rapporteur in 15 years.

In my work with the UN, I have been struck by the fact that Kazakhstan, a member of the Security Council, is working closely with a number of other central Asian states. They have a long way to go, but I believe that many of these countries are very keen to become more active in the international community. Freedom of religion or belief is an issue on which, patiently and through diplomacy, we can bring some pressure to bear. I hope we will see some improvement.

Freedom of religion or belief remains a priority area for our engagement with China. We continue to raise our concerns on persecution of religious minorities through our UK-China human rights dialogue. It is worth putting on record that China is making significant progress on our priority issues, including climate change, human trafficking and modern slavery, and is taking a role in the international community. Progress has been
made, and we need to give credit where it is due. We are making advances in certain areas, which I hope will be a precursor to improvement of religious tolerance along the lines that we have discussed.

As has been pointed out, Bangladesh has policies and laws intended to safeguard the rights of all citizens to practise their faiths freely. None the less, religious tolerance remains under pressure. Our high commission in Dhaka remains in regular contact with religious groups and leaders and is developing a strategy dedicated to addressing intolerance against religious minorities. Lord Ahmad publicly visited an Ahmadiyya mosque in Bangladesh last August, making a robust case for religious tolerance.

In Pakistan, our excellent high commission is working to promote religious tolerance; I saw that work for myself when I visited Pakistan in November. I have raised and will continue to raise the treatment of religious minorities—including discrimination and violence against the Ahmadiyya and Christian communities—with Pakistan’s Ministry of Human Rights.

Sioibhain McDonagh: Does the Minister agree that the first step towards solving a problem is accepting that it exists? On a recent visit to the Pakistan high commission, the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and I met the deputy high commissioner, who informed us that there was no discrimination against Ahmadis in Pakistan and that there were no issues relating to blasphemy laws or Ahmadis going through the Pakistan judicial system.

Mark Field: I accept that point, although that was not my experience in the discussions I had. We will continue to make the case for the Ahmadi minority. We will also raise another issue that was brought up today: the persecution and forced conversions that the Hindu minority face.

Let me touch briefly on our project work. The United Kingdom is working to promote freedom of religion or belief and religious tolerance through a range of UK projects. Some are funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office through our Magna Carta fund for human rights; others are funded by the Department for International Development. DFID and FCO officials are, I hope, working side by side in that regard as seamlessly as in other areas of government.

The right to freedom of religion or belief is one of a range of human rights that DFID takes into account when providing direct financial support to foreign Governments. I cannot speak for my ministerial colleague and hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) or for the Secretary of State, but I know that they will be made well aware of concerns raised in our debate. DFID and FCO officials work closely to focus the minds of Governments of countries that receive aid on the fundamental importance of respecting all human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Let me give some examples of how UK funds are spent. Our embassy in Rangoon in Burma is supporting projects to address the drivers of prejudice and inter-communal violence. The Rohingya issue has been dreadful, but is by no means the only profound minority issue in Burma today. We have tried to deliver an inter-faith dialogue and workshop for civil servants, parliamentarians and non-governmental organisations. One has to find a way to address the catastrophic issues faced around the Rohingyas.

Similarly, we are supporting a project in Pakistan that shows animations in schools and online to highlight the value to society of diverse religions, social and ethnic groups. Our Magna Carta fund is supporting a project to raise awareness of challenges faced by freedom of religion campaigners in south and central Asia. Our aim is to persuade people of the need for better protection for such campaigners. The project also trains them in advocacy so that they are better equipped to defend themselves. It has facilitated discussions between human rights defenders and the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst, who was delighted to tell us that those interactions have helped him to develop his own analysis of the specific threats facing human rights defenders.

I thank all hon. Members for indulging me in my attempt to put as much of our work on the record as possible. A huge amount is going on. I am very pleased that my team at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is so energised, not least by the passion felt in Parliament for the work being done. Our diplomatic network will continue to work hard to promote and defend the fundamental right of freedom of religion or belief around the world through direct engagement with host Governments and UK-funded work. We are also ensuring that our staff are trained in religious literacy to improve their ability to carry out this important work.

I always look forward to working closely with the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. I thank hon. Members profoundly for their work to ensure that the public profile of this crucial issue remains so high.

4.9 pm

Jim Shannon: Thank you for calling me to speak again, Sir David.

First of all, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have made the effort to come along today. Many others wanted to be here but, because of the weather conditions, they had to get home. Some are here because of the weather conditions—they could not get away.

[Laughter.] No, that is not fair. They are here because they are interested, which is the main thing.

We have had some magnificent contributions to the debate. I will not give a summary of them, Sir David, because I would not have the time and you would not let me. However, I will just say that there were significant contributions from the hon. Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), for Mitcham and Morden (Sioibhain McDonagh), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), for Beckhenham (Bob Stewart), for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), and for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day).

I thank the shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Leeds North East—for summing up so well. It is very hard to follow that act, but I thank him because he is a gentleman with passion.

I say to the Minister that we are very privileged in the all-party group on freedom of religion or belief. Some staff members are here today and the all-party group
does so well because of the workers here in Parliament, and because of what they do for the group and stakeholders. Our communication with the Minister has been substantial and it is immensely appreciated by both us and our stakeholders. We recognise in the Minister a man—who has a passion for and interest in this issue. I am minded of a biblical story. I will not go into too much detail, Sir David, but I will just say to the Minister that we are here to “strengthen your arms” and hold them up, if I can use that analogy. Those who know the story—everyone here will—know that it is a very important one.

I will just say thanks again to everyone for contributing to the debate, and finish with a quick quotation from Scripture. It is from James 3:17-18:

“But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”

I will just say that everyone here today has made the voice of the voiceless heard in this House, and how well they have all done.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered freedom of religion or belief.

4.11 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Written Statements

Tuesday 20 February 2018

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of The Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 20 February 2018. The UK will be represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International and EU, HM Treasury). European Union Finance Ministers will discuss the following:

Early Morning Session

The Eurogroup President will brief Ministers on the outcomes of the 19 February meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

Financial services legislation

The Bulgarian presidency will present information on current financial services legislative proposals, followed by an exchange of views.

Sustainable finance

The Council will hold an exchange of views on the recommendations of the High-Level Expert Group on sustainable finance.

Discharge of the 2016 EU Budget

Ministers will be asked to approve a Council recommendation to discharge to the European Commission in respect of the 2016 EU Budget.

EU Budget guidelines for 2019

Ministers will be asked to approve Council conclusions on the EU Budget guidelines for 2019.

Public procurement and strategic investment

The European Commission will present information on the public procurement strategy it adopted on 3 October 2017.

EVEL Analysis

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I have today published a written submission outlining the Government’s analysis of how the English votes for English laws principle relates to all Government amendments tabled for Report stage of the Finance (No.2) Bill.

The Department’s assessment is that the amendments do not change the territorial application of the Bill. The analysis holds if all the Government amendments be accepted.

I have deposited a copy of the submission in the Library of the House.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Five years into the current bTB strategy, drafted in 2013 and published a year later, the time is right to review progress on the various elements of the strategy. I envisage further reviews will take place at five-yearly intervals in the future.

The purpose of the review is to consider progress made to date and what further actions might need to be prioritised now in order to ensure we maintain progress towards our target of becoming officially TB free after 25 years.

Bovine TB is a slow-moving insidious disease which presents major challenges. It can be difficult to detect; it can be harboured in the wildlife population; no vaccine is fully effective and none of our diagnostic tests are perfect. The review will be forward looking. Its aim is to identify what actions we could take now to ensure that other elements of the strategy, such as cattle vaccination or improved genetic resistance, are ready to deploy at later phases of the strategy.

We now have over 20 cull zones that are operational and we envisage additional ones for 2018. Although it is too early to make definitive conclusions, early analysis suggests that the first two cull zones are seeing the anticipated impact in terms of reduced incidence of the disease. However, we do need to consider what further steps or actions should follow the conclusion of each four-year cull. After all, none of us wants to be culling badgers forever. The review will therefore also consider such issues.

The review will be led and overseen by an external chair and I am delighted that Professor Sir Charles Godfray has agreed to take on this role. Professor Godfray is a population biologist with interests including ecology and epidemiology, currently based at the University of Oxford where he is director of the Oxford Martin School. He is also a fellow of the Royal Society. He chaired the independent scientific review of the randomised badger control trial, and is chair of DEFRA’s Science Advisory Council.

The chair will be supported by a small working group, membership of which will be confirmed in due course. The chief veterinary officer and the director of animal and plant health will provide oversight within the Department.

The review is expected to commence in March and to be completed by the end of September 2018. The findings will be submitted to DEFRA Ministers for consideration with a final report published in due course.

As well as this work, DEFRA has launched a consultation on the principle of allowing badger control in the low-risk area to enable rapid action to tackle outbreaks at the local level where there is evidence of infection in badgers linked with infection in cattle; and to help preserve the area’s low disease incidence. Any decision on whether or not to implement badger control in the low-risk area will be taken by the Secretary of State following the consultation, once all the responses have been considered alongside relevant scientific evidence and veterinary advice.

The terms of reference for the review and the consultation have been published on the gov.uk website and placed in the Libraries of both Houses.
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Fixed Recoverable Costs in Lower-value Clinical Negligence Claims

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord O’Shaughnessy) has made the following statement:

Today I am publishing a document summarising the responses we received to our consultation ‘Introducing fixed recoverable costs in lower value clinical negligence claims’.

Following the end of the consultation in May 2017, the right hon. Lord Justice Jackson published a report “Review of Civil Litigation Costs: Supplemental Report Fixed Recoverable Costs”, which included a recommendation that The Civil Justice Council should, in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Care, set up a working party with both claimant and defendant representatives to develop a bespoke process for clinical negligence claims initially up to £25,000 together with a grid of fixed recoverable costs for such cases.

Ministers at the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Justice have accepted this recommendation and I would like to inform Parliament that work has commenced in setting up the working party with both claimant and defendant representatives.

The document I am publishing today sets out a summary of what we heard in our consultation, and points to The Civil Justice Council working group as the next step in developing the fixed recoverable costs policy and the report into fixed cost proposals by Professor Paul Fenn.

It is also available online at: http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements.

[HCWS472]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Rights of EU Citizens Resident in the UK

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government have been clear since the start of negotiations with the EU that protecting the rights of EU citizens in the UK, together with the rights of UK nationals living in EU countries, was their first priority.

Since the opposition day debate on 29 November 2017 secured by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) on the vital issue of safeguarding citizens’ rights, we have delivered on that commitment and reached an agreement with our EU partners on citizens’ rights. The agreement was set out as part of a joint report drawn from the consultation data. To ensure all EU citizens and their families have enough time to apply for UK status, the scheme will remain open for applications for at least two years after the UK leaves the EU. During this period, they will enjoy the rights conferred by the agreement. The application fee will not exceed the cost charged to British citizens for a UK passport, and for those who already have a valid permanent residence document there will be a simple process to exchange this for a new settled status document which will be free of charge.

The agreement reached in December will now be converted into the legal text of the Withdrawal agreement. The withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill will incorporate the contents of the withdrawal agreement, including the agreement on citizens’ rights, into UK law by primary legislation. This will mean that the agreement on citizens’ rights will have direct effect in UK law and EU citizens can rely directly on it.

We have agreed with the EU that the eligibility criteria for UK settled status will be the same as, or more favourable than, those set out in the EU Directive 2004/38/EC for acquiring permanent residence. In line with this, we have already committed to setting the evidence requirements to suit the demands of this unique situation and have taken a unilateral decision to introduce more favourable provisions to ensure that everyone lawfully in the UK on exit day will be able to stay. For example, we will not require evidence that economically inactive EU citizens have previously held comprehensive sickness insurance or apply a “genuine and effective” work test. We are engaging closely with representative bodies for EU citizens in the UK to understand all the different circumstances under which they have built their lives in the UK so as to tailor evidential requirements appropriately.

Those who obtain settled status under the agreement on citizens’ rights will be granted indefinite leave to remain in UK law. This status will provide the holder with the same access to benefits, education and healthcare as those who have obtained permanent residence under EU law.

In addition, those granted indefinite leave to remain in line with this agreement will also benefit from certain more favourable entitlements than those with permanent residence under EU law. For example, their status will not lapse unless they have been continuously absent from the UK for over five years, as opposed to two years.

Importantly, our agreement on citizens’ rights has also opened the door for us to finalise work on the development and delivery of the new system for settled status applications.

The scheme, which will open for applications by the end of 2018, will be streamlined, user-friendly and will draw on existing Government data to minimise the burden on applicants to provide evidence.

The Home Office will work with applicants to ensure that their application is not refused on minor technicalities, and caseworkers considering applications will exercise discretion in favour of the applicant where appropriate. As a result, we expect the vast majority of cases to be granted.

To ensure all EU citizens and their families have been exercising free movement rights in the UK at the time of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU, Family members, including those from outside the EU, living lawfully in the UK with a qualifying EU citizen at this point are also protected.

As part of our citizens’ rights agreement, we have agreed with the EU that we will introduce a new settled status scheme under UK law for EU citizens and their family members who are covered by the agreement. Those who have already had five years of continuous residence in the UK will be eligible to apply for settled status. Others will be able to remain in the UK to build up their five years’ residence.
We are pleased with the progress we have made on citizens’ rights. Reaching an agreement with the EU on this and other separation issues is an important step on our journey towards a new relationship with our European partners.

The Government hugely value the contributions that EU citizens and their families make to the economic, social and cultural fabric of this country, and we have been clear from the start that we want them to stay. The agreement we have reached with the EU will allow EU citizens to do this and continue living their lives as they do now.

[HCWS471]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Housing Market

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The Government believe that consumers should have swift, effective routes to complain and to access resolution when things go wrong with their home—whether they are a tenant, or a homeowner.

We are concerned that the current redress landscape is confusing and does not always support this. There are multiple redress providers, each operating different practices. Even this array of schemes does not provide for every eventuality. Some people have no option but to take a grievance through the courts.

On Sunday 18 February the Government launched a public consultation on strengthening redress in housing. The consultation is open to consumers, providers of housing services, and existing redress schemes, and asks how we can make the system simpler and more effective for consumers.

It asks about consumers’ experiences of redress, and how to improve “in-house” complaint processes to ensure that issues get resolved as quickly as possible.

It considers the practices that redress schemes should adopt in terms of timeliness, accessibility and transparency; and it considers the powers that schemes require to operate effectively.

It also considers gaps in redress, and how these could be filled. This includes consideration of how to implement our commitment to require that all private landlords join a redress scheme, as well as improving access to redress for buyers of new-build homes.

Finally, the consultation also seeks views on whether redress should be consolidated into a single housing ombudsman service and, if so, what form this might take.

The policy proposals primarily relate to England. The UK Government will be discussing these issues with devolved Administrations where existing legislation also has scope outside England.

The consultation will run for eight weeks and ends on 16 April 2018.

Copies of the consultation document will be placed in the House Library and are available on the Government’s website here:


[HCWS467]

JUSTICE

UN Convention Against Torture

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): The OPCAT, which the UK ratified in December 2003, requires states parties to establish a “National Preventive Mechanism” (NPM) to carry out visits to places of detention to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

The Government established the independent UK NPM in March 2009, and extended its membership in December 2013, and in January 2017. The UK NPM is currently composed of 21 scrutiny bodies covering the whole of the UK, and prepares annual reports on its activities. It also has an independent website at: www.nationalpreventivemechanism.org.uk.

Following previous practice, I have presented to Parliament the eight NPM annual report (Command Paper 9563). This report covers the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017. I commend the important work that the NPM has carried out over this period and the NPM’s independent role in safeguarding the human rights of detainees across the UK. I also note the NPM’s observations around prisons, children in detention, police and court custody, immigration detention, and health and social care detentions.

[HCWS469]
Written Statements

Wednesday 21 February 2018

TREASURY

Public Service Pension Indexation and Revaluation 2018

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Legislation governing public service pensions requires them to be increased annually by the same percentage as additional pensions (state earnings-related pension and state second pension). Public service pensions will therefore be increased from 9 April 2018 by 3%, in line with the annual increase in the consumer prices index up to September 2017, except for those public service pensions which have been in payment for less than a year, which will receive a pro rata increase.

Separately, in the new career average public service pension schemes, pensions in accrual are revalued annually in relation to either prices or earnings depending on the terms specified in their scheme regulations. The Public Service Pensions Act 2013 requires HMT to specify a measure of prices and of earnings to be used for revaluation by these schemes.

The prices measure is the consumer prices index up to September 2017. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of prices, therefore, will use the figure of 3% for the prices element of revaluation.

The earnings measure is the whole economy average weekly earnings (non-seasonally adjusted and including bonuses and arrears) up to September 2017. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of earnings, therefore, will use the figure of 3% for the earnings element of revaluation.

Revaluation is one part of the amount of pension that members earn in a year and needs to be considered in conjunction with the amount of in-year accrual. Typically, schemes with lower revaluation will have faster accrual and therefore members will earn more pension per year. The following list shows how the main public service schemes will be affected by revaluation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scheme</th>
<th>Police</th>
<th>Fire</th>
<th>Civil Service</th>
<th>NHS Teachers</th>
<th>LGPS</th>
<th>Armed Forces</th>
<th>Judicial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revaluation for active member</td>
<td>4.25%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Charges

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord O'Shaughnessy) has made the following statement:

Regulations will shortly be laid before Parliament to increase certain national health service charges in England from 1 April 2018. In the 2015 spending review, the Government committed to support the five year forward view with £10 billion investment in real terms by 2020-21 to fund frontline NHS services. Alongside this, the Government expect the NHS to deliver £22 billion of efficiency savings to secure the best value from NHS resources and primary care must play its part.

This year, therefore, we have increased the prescription charge by 20p from £8.60 to £8.80 for each medicine or appliance dispensed. To ensure that those with the greatest need, and who are not already exempt from the charge, are protected we have frozen the cost of the prescription prepayment certificates (PPC) for another year. The three-month PPC remains at £29.10 and the cost of the annual PPC will stay at £104. Taken together, this means prescription charge income is expected to rise broadly in line with inflation.

Charges for wigs and fabric supports will also be increased in line with inflation.

Details of the revised charges for 2018-19 can be found in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charge from 1 April 2018 (£)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prescription charges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single charge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-month PPC (no change)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-month PPC (no change)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgical brassiere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdominal or spinal support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stock modacrylic wig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial human hair wig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full bespoke human hair wig</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PRIME MINISTER

Size of the House of Lords

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): On 20 December 2016, the Lord Speaker established a Committee to explore methods by which the size of the House of Lords can be reduced, commensurate with its current role and functions. The report of the Committee was published on 31 October 2017 and it was debated by the House of Lords on 19 December 2017.

Yesterday, I wrote to the Lord Speaker to set out my views on the Committee’s recommendations. The letter can be viewed online at:

The British aerospace industry has underpinned the operational advantage and freedom of action of the British military since the birth of airpower. It has long been an engine of national and local prosperity: made up of close to 2,500 companies, it generates more than £33.5 billion in turnover, and employs more than 128,000 people, some 26,000 of them in highly skilled research, design and engineering jobs. The defence elements of that industry are particularly valuable: of the £73 billion brought into this country through defence-related exports over 10 years, around 85% was generated by aerospace, much of it specifically by the combat air sector.

The Government are committed to supporting growth and prosperity across British industry, and defence has a critical role to play in that commitment. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), recently published an industrial strategy which reinforces our comprehensive support to the UK economy and our vision for a modern, internationally competitive UK industrial base. Following on from that my own Department published the defence industrial policy refresh in December 2017 which made it clear that in a very few cases, a deeper analysis may be needed to establish whether our national security objectives would be served by specific sector approaches which help deliver long-term value for money, operational advantage or freedom of action. Combat air is one of these sectors.

Delivery of battle-winning capability to the UK’s armed forces is dependent on a number of vital national technologies and skills. This goes to the heart of our operational advantage and freedom of action and the strategy will seek to ensure the UK maintains the ability to operate both independently and as part of international coalitions.

Recognising the importance of the combat air sector to UK military capability, freedom of action, prosperity and our industrial base, the MOD has decided to develop a combat air strategy as part of the modernising defence programme. Working closely with other Government Departments, industry and international partners, this work will define the UK’s future combat air aspirations, building on extant Government and defence policies to identify the industrial capacity and capabilities necessary to deliver that ambition. In doing so, we will consider operational capability, technological advantage, economic benefits, industrial capability, capacity and skills, as well as international partnering, wider prosperity and export potential. The aim is to set the framework and timeline to assess options for the UK’s future combat air requirements and associated decision making. This should create a strong foundation for industry self-funded research and development and investment in skills, capacity and capability, while also testing UK industry’s ability to deliver our future requirements, remain sustainable and internationally competitive.

It will set out in practical terms how the MOD can deliver this critical military capability in an affordable way by establishing a more strategic relationship with UK industry, working with international partners and securing a competitive and sustainable industrial base to maximise prosperity.


ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Roadside Nitrogen Dioxide Concentrations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Clean air is one of the most basic requirements of a healthy environment for us all to live, work, and bring up families. Air pollution has improved significantly since 2010 but we recognise that there is more to do, particularly to improve pollution hotspots in our towns and cities.

Present problems with air quality in the UK are the direct result of the EU’s failed emissions testing regime, the actions of certain irresponsible car manufacturers, and the rapid increase in the number of diesel cars on the road since 2001. Twenty-one other EU member states are also breaching legal air quality limits.

In July 2017 we published the UK plan for tackling nitrogen dioxide concentrations, and said that we will end the sale of all new conventional petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2040. We are investing £3.5 billion to improve air quality and reduce harmful emissions.

Yesterday the High Court handed down judgment on the judicial review of the 2017 plan.

The judge dismissed two of the three complaints considered during the case in relation to England. Specifically he found that there is no error in the Government’s approach to tackling NO$_2$ concentration exceedances in areas with some of the worst air quality problems, and that the national air quality modelling and monitoring that underpin the plan are compliant with our legal requirements.

In relation to five cities identified in 2015 as having particularly marked air quality challenges, Birmingham, Nottingham, Derby, Southampton and Leeds, the judge found that the Government’s approach to tackling their exceedances was “sensible, rational and lawful”.

We welcome the fact that the Court has dismissed the complaint relating to these areas with major air quality problems and has found that we are taking appropriate action. We are also pleased that the Court agrees that our evidence in support of the 2017 plan is sound.

In relation to local authority areas which are expected to achieve compliance between 2018 and 2021, Ministers have already offered significant support, and as recognised in the judgment have “urged and encouraged” them to come up with proposals to improve air quality. However, the Court found that the Government should have legally required the local authorities to take such steps, but acknowledged that further action will not be required in 12 areas where compliance will be achieved this year.

We had previously considered that it was sufficient to take a pragmatic, less formal approach to such areas. However, in view of the Court’s judgment, we are prepared to take a more formal line with the other 33 local authorities.
We have already been corresponding with the relevant local authorities to offer them support in identifying measures to improve local air quality. These authorities had already been asked to provide initial information by 28 February on the action they are taking. They have now been asked to attend a meeting on 28 February to discuss their plans, and whether there are any additional actions they can take to accelerate achieving compliance with legal limits for N0\textsubscript{2} concentrations. We also now intend in March to issue legally binding directions requiring these areas to undertake studies to identify any such measures.

As required by the Court order, we will publish a supplement to the 2017 plan by 5 October, drawing on the findings from local authorities' feasibility studies.

The Welsh Government were also a defendant in the judicial review. Air quality is a devolved policy area in the UK; each devolved Administration has responsibility for meeting its own obligations under the ambient air quality directive.

The Welsh Ministers indicated that they recognise that the Welsh element of the air quality plan does not satisfy legal requirements. They have undertaken to publish a supplemental plan, following consultation, by 31 July 2018.

As we set out in the 2017 plan, this Government are committed to improving air quality, and we have pledged to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it. Later this year we will be publishing a comprehensive clean air strategy which will set out further steps to tackle air pollution.

[HCWS477]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Gosport Investigation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): The Gosport independent panel announced on 21 February that its disclosure to the Gosport families will be on 20 June 2018 in Portsmouth. The Gosport independent panel was formally established in July 2014. The panel is chaired by Bishop James Jones and its role is to review the documentary evidence held across a range of organisations concerning the initial care of families’ relatives and the subsequent investigations into their deaths in Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

[HCWS478]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): The Council of Europe’s convention on the manipulation of sports competitions seeks to combat the threat of match fixing and protect the integrity of sport. The EU wishes to become a party to the convention and has published two draft Council decisions to conclude the convention, one of which relates to justice and home affairs matters.

The Government have decided not to opt in to the justice and home affairs provision set out in the draft EU Council decision to conclude, on behalf of the EU, the Council of Europe convention on the manipulation of sports competitions with regard to matters related to substantive criminal law and judicial co-operation in criminal matters. This decision cites a title V legal base and therefore the opt-in applies.

The convention requires that EU member states have provisions in place to regulate the act of sports betting and to combat the manipulation of sports competitions in relation to sports betting—including provisions to make those acts criminal offences—and to apply those provisions extraterritorially (which can be derogated).

Only one discussion has taken place on this draft decision, in September 2017, during Estonia’s presidency of the EU Council, with no further negotiations having been scheduled, and with no timetable presented for adoption. The Government placed a scrutiny reservation on this decision at that discussion which remains in place.

A draft EU Council decision with regard to matters related to substantive criminal law and judicial co-operation in criminal matters was published in 2015 for the EU to sign the convention and, at that time, the Government decided not to opt in to the justice and home affairs provision. That decision was also not taken forward for adoption.

While there remains uncertainty as to how the EU might participate in the convention, the Government have taken the decision to maintain their position and not opt in to the justice and home affairs provision in order to preserve the UK’s ability to implement the convention according to national needs, and in particular to preserve the ability to exercise the right of derogation under article 19 of the convention (the extraterritorial application of offences)—preventing the EU from exercising competence on behalf of the UK.

Protecting the integrity of sport is taken seriously by the Government and we view the convention as an important tool in the fight against match fixing. We therefore intend for the UK to become a signatory to the convention later this year.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:


The purpose of the proposed amendment is to introduce the authentication of a document by an electronic seal. This option is offered by Regulation No 910/2014. This proposed amendment is purely technical and there are no policy implications for the UK.

The legislative change is needed as the change in electronic seal alters the legal status in the publication.

The legal base of the proposal is Article 352 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Under Section 8 of the EU Act 2011, decisions under this require an Act of Parliament to approve the measure, unless both Houses agree to a motion that a decision is urgent or an exemption applies.

In this case Section 8(6)(a) of the EU Act 2011 provides an exemption to make provision equivalent to that made by a measure previously adopted under Article 352 TFEU. The proposal is to make a provision equivalent to that made by Council Regulation (EU) No. 216/2013, which was previously adopted under Article 352 TFEU on 7 March 2013. This proposal has the same substance matter. It relates to the electronic authentication of the Official Journal. As such, all that has altered is the specific form the authentication is to take. Therefore this proposal does not require an Act of Parliament for the UK to approve the measure.

[HCWS481]

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right Hon. Friend the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mark Field) will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 26 February. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

Prior to the FAC there will be an informal meeting, over breakfast, of the European Action Group for the Republic of Moldova with the Foreign Minister of Moldova. The FAC will then discuss Moldova, Venezuela and the middle east peace process (MEPP). There will be a lunch with the Secretary General of the Arab League and some Arab Foreign Ministers.

Moldova

Ministers will have a substantive discussion of the key challenges facing the Republic of Moldova, including its implementation of the association agreement and its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), and engagement by the EU and member states. The UK remains fully engaged in the reform process in Moldova, and will focus on the need to encourage the Republic of Moldova to maintain progress in this process.
Venezuela

The FAC will discuss the political and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, following the announcement that presidential elections will take place on 22 April. The FAC will consider the recent breakdown in political dialogue between the Government and Opposition, what conditions would constitute a credible election, and what more can be done to address the humanitarian situation.

Middle East Peace Process

Ministers will discuss the latest developments in the MEPP ahead of a lunch with the Secretary General of the Arab League and Foreign Ministers from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan to discuss prospects for the MEPP, including long-standing EU support for a negotiated two-state solution.

Council Conclusions

The FAC is expected to adopt conclusions on Burma, Cambodia, Moldova, the Maldives, climate diplomacy and the Special Report on EU Support to the Fight to End Human Trafficking in South and South East Asia.

EU Foreign Ministers: Informal Meeting (Gymnich)

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the biannual informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers (known as the Gymnich) on 15-16 February in Sofia, Bulgaria. The Gymnich was hosted by Deputy Prime Minister for Judicial Reform and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria, Ekaterina Zaharieva and was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. Discussion centred on Syria, the western Balkans and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).

EU Foreign Ministers met Foreign Ministers of the candidate countries over dinner on 15 February and on the morning of 16 February.

The format of the Gymnich is designed to allow EU Foreign Ministers to engage in informal discussion on a number of issues. In contrast to the Foreign Affairs Council (the next of which will be held on 26 February), Ministers do not take formal decisions or agree conclusions at the Gymnich.

**Gymnich Discussion**

**Syria**

Ministers expressed concern about the security situation. My right hon. Friend spoke about the importance of the Geneva peace talks and maintaining pressure on the Syrian regime.

**Western Balkans**

Ministers discussed the strategy, recently published by the Commission, and agreed the importance of remaining engaged in the region.

**DPRK**

Ministers briefly discussed the DPRK. They welcomed renewed engagement between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea while emphasising the importance of maintaining pressure, including through the full implementation of sanctions.
Written Statements

Monday 26 February 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry):
We will today introduce the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill to this House.

We are taking this action because the energy market is not working for all customers. The Competition and Markets Authority 2016 investigation into the energy market highlighted that domestic customers of the Big 6 energy companies pay on average £1.4 billion a year more than they would in a truly competitive market.

We believe that competition is the best way to drive value and service for customers. Where this is not happening, the Government have a duty to act by ensuring regulation is effective and companies have the right incentives to provide value.

The energy market is not working for all consumers.

There is, in effect, a two-tier market in operation whereby active customers save money by switching suppliers, but those who cannot or do not switch remain on poor value tariffs. It is of particular concern that customers who do not switch typically tend to be more vulnerable than those who are getting the best deals. The difference between the cheapest available tariff and the average standard variable tariff (SVT) of a Big 6 supplier is around £300.

Earlier this month, 1 million more vulnerable consumers who receive the Warm Home Discount were protected from higher bills with the extension of Ofgem’s safeguard tariff cap. There are now 5 million households protected by this cap which was introduced in 2017.

The Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill will, subject to parliamentary approval, put in place a requirement on the independent regulator, Ofgem, to cap domestic energy tariffs until at least 2020. Currently, some consumers are paying up to £300 more than they need to—this cap will help bring this overcharging under control. It will require Ofgem to set an absolute cap on standard variable and default tariffs, protecting the 11 million households in England, Wales and Scotland who currently buy their energy on this basis and who are not protected by existing price caps.

The Bill is part of a package of measures being introduced by the Government to increase competition in the retail energy market and lower prices for consumers. These include support for more and faster switching, initiatives to improve engagement and the roll-out of smart meters. We believe all of these measures will help create the conditions for more effective competition.

In setting the cap, Ofgem must protect existing and future domestic customers, but must do so in a way that creates incentives for suppliers to improve efficiency, sets the cap at a level that enables suppliers to compete effectively for supply contracts, maintains incentives for customers to switch and ensures that efficient suppliers are able to finance their businesses. The Government intend Ofgem to be able to set the temporary price cap by the end of this year so that it is in place by next winter.

The cap will apply until the end of 2020 when Ofgem will recommend to Government whether it should be extended on an annual basis up to 2023.

The introduction of the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill comes after the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee scrutinised the draft Bill as part of the Government’s work to ensure the Bill would be effective and would meet its objectives. This pre-legislative scrutiny took written and oral evidence from a wide range of stakeholders. The Committee made a number of recommendations about the Bill, which the Government have accepted in full, including the Committee’s recommendation that Ofgem reviews the level at which the cap is set at least every six months, and the recommendation to add in safeguards so that where consumers make an active choice to opt for green SVT or default tariffs, Ofgem is able to protect these customers but not stifle investment in green energy. Ofgem will also be required to consult on a potential exemption for green tariffs.

This Bill will give the regulator the powers to protect those consumers who are overpaying for energy, while ensuring that other initiatives such as switching, smart meter roll-out and consumer education continue to contribute to a more competitive market.

[HCWS484]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council: 27 February

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I will attend the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 27 February 2018 to represent the UK’s interests. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member.

The provisional agenda includes:

Presentation of the priorities of the Bulgarian presidency

The Bulgarian presidency is expected to present its four priorities during its six month tenure. These are: the future of Europe and young people, the Western Balkans, security and stability and the digital economy.

Annotated draft agenda for the European Council on 22-23 March 2018

Ministers will discuss the draft agenda for March European Council. This includes: migration; jobs, growth and competitiveness; the Western Balkans; and tax and the digital economy. Other relevant foreign policy issues will be added to the agenda in the run up to the European Council.

Rule of law in Poland/Article 7(1) TEU Reasoned Proposal

The Commission will present a summary of its “Reasoned Proposal” which, in accordance with Article 7(1), proposes a Council determination on the rule of law in Poland. The Commission will also update Ministers on the ongoing dialogue with the Polish Government.

[HCWS485]
The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): On 7 November I told the House that I was minded to implement, subject to parliamentary approval, the locally-led proposal I had received for improving local government in Dorset, and I invited representations before I took my final decision.

Having carefully considered all the representations I have received and all the relevant information available to me, I am today announcing that I have decided to implement, subject to parliamentary approval, that locally-led proposal to replace the existing nine councils across Dorset—two small unitary councils of Bournemouth and Poole, and the two tier structure of Dorset County Council and the district councils of Christchurch, East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset, and Weymouth and Portland with two new councils.

These new councils are a single unitary council for the areas of Bournemouth, Poole and that part of the county of Christchurch, and a single unitary council for the rest of the current county area.

I am satisfied that these new councils are likely to improve local government and service delivery in their areas, generating savings, increasing financial resilience, facilitating a more strategic and holistic approach to planning and housing challenges, and sustaining good local services. I am also satisfied that across Dorset as a whole there is a good deal of local support for these new councils, and that the area of each council is a credible geography.

In my statement of 7 November I noted that the nine councils were already working together in joint committees on planning possible implementation of the proposal, and that further steps were needed to secure local consent. I am clear that further steps have been taken, and that the nine councils are continuing to work constructively together on planning implementation.

I now intend to prepare and lay before Parliament drafts of the necessary secondary legislation to give effect to my decision. My intention is that if Parliament approves this legislation the new councils will be established on 1 April 2019 with the first elections to the councils held on 2 May 2019. I also now intend to make and lay before Parliament an order to delay for one year, as requested by the Borough Council, the May 2018 local elections in Weymouth and Portland so as to avoid members being elected for only one year if Parliament approves the legislation establishing the new councils.

Finally, in my 7 November statement I said that once I had made my final decision on the Dorset proposal, I would decide whether to implement, subject to parliamentary approval, Dorset councils' proposal for a combined authority. As a first step I intend now to ask the leaders of the Dorset councils how they would like to proceed with their combined authority proposal in the light of my decision on the proposal.

[HCWS486]
Written Statements

Tuesday 27 February 2018

TREASURY
Banking Act 2009 Reporting

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):
The Treasury has laid before the House of Commons a report required under section 231 of the Banking Act 2009 covering the period from 1 April 2017 to 30 September 2017. Copies of the document are available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS494]

DEFENCE
Armed Forces Pay Review Body

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):
I am pleased to announce that the Prime Minister has invited Mr John Steele to continue to serve as Chair of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body for a further two-month term of office, commencing on 1 March 2018. This allows Mr Steele to draw pay round 18 to a conclusion.

I would also like to take this opportunity to announce that the Prime Minister has appointed Mr Peter Maddison as the next Chair of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. His appointment will commence on 1 March 2018 and run until 28 February 2021.

Both the extension and the appointment have been conducted in accordance with the guidance of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

[HCWS487]

Military Field Hospitals: Civilian Casualties

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):
In all combat operations the Ministry of Defence does everything it can to minimise the risk to civilians through our rigorous targeting processes and the professionalism of the armed forces. We recognise, however, that there is always the risk of inadvertent civilian casualties, particularly in complex and congested urban environments.

The Ministry of Defence places a significant value on the preservation of life, both to our own forces and also to civilians. When a field hospital is deployed in support of either combat or humanitarian operations, our armed forces regularly and indiscriminately treat civilian cases, to save life, limb or eyesight. This lifesaving work deserves to be acknowledged.

Recognising the important work being done by a number of UK-registered charities, including Every Casualty Worldwide, Save the Children, and AirWars, to ensure that all lives lost to armed violence anywhere in the world are properly recorded, the Ministry of Defence is making a commitment to increase transparency by publishing the number of all civilians admitted to UK military field hospitals. This information will detail the following:

- Type of civilian (e.g. UK civilian, local civilian, detainees. The split by type of civilian varies depending on the nature of the operation)
- Casualty type (e.g. battle injury, non-battle injury, disease/natural causes)
- Disposal (e.g. death in hospital, discharged home, discharged to another hospital)

The information provided will be counts of casualties and not details of individuals (names etc.).

The Ministry of Defence hopes that the release of this information will provide the public with an informed picture of the efforts the UK Government take while undertaking operations to provide urgent medical care to civilians.

[HCWS492]

Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):
I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of the Reserve Forces’ and Cadets’ Associations (RFCAs) combined annual report and accounts for 2016/17. I am very grateful to the RFCAs for their valuable work in support of the Reserve Forces and Cadet organisations.

[HCWS491]

EDUCATION
Mathematics and English: Subject Content

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):
Functional skills are qualifications that enable people to develop and demonstrate a good standard of mathematics and English for success in life and work. They are an important part of education provision, particularly for students over the age of 16, apprentices and adults seeking to retrain and improve their skills later in life. The Government are reforming these qualifications to make sure that they give people the best possible preparation for employment, further study and everyday life. We also want new functional skills qualifications to provide employers with a reliable measure of students’ skills, knowledge and achievement.

As part of these reforms, today I am publishing revised subject content for mathematics and English functional skills qualifications. This follows extensive engagement with employers, teachers, subject specialists, and a public consultation which ran from the 12 September to the 7 November 2017.

The new content includes the skills employers tell us they need in their workforce and sets out the learning aims, requirements and standards of each functional skills qualification, moving from entry level 1 to 3 up to levels 1 and 2. Functional skills level 2 is currently accepted as a completion requirement for level 3 apprenticeships and higher, as an alternative option to a GCSE standard pass. Across all levels in both subjects we have improved how students learn to read, write, communicate, use numbers, measures, handle mathematical information and solve problems. In English, by level 2, students are required to read, write and communicate using straightforward and complex instructive, descriptive, explanatory and persuasive texts on a range of technical and non-technical topics. In mathematics, by level 2, students are required to use numbers of any size and form, including ratios, fractions, decimals and percentages, construct, interpret and handle a range of statistical information and data, and use their knowledge and skills to obtain solutions to complex problems.
The new content will be taught from September 2019. These changes aim to ensure that people have the opportunity to develop and demonstrate their mathematics and English skills through accessible, practical, rigorous and well-respected qualifications.

The mathematics and English functional skills subject content documents, the Government’s response to the consultation and the equality impact assessment can be viewed online as attachments: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-02-27/HCWS490/

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Farming and our Countryside

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I am publishing today the first consultation on a wholly domestic agriculture policy in nearly half a century. “Health and Harmony: The future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit” sets out our ambitions for farming in England and seeks the views of all readers on its proposals.

Leaving the European Union marks an unprecedented opportunity for fundamental reform of agriculture in the United Kingdom. The farmed environment is a source of food that nourishes the body and a landscape that nourishes the soul. We want an agricultural policy that values not only the great British food farmers produce but also the unique public goods that farming, horticulture and forestry provide.

We believe these proposals could work for the whole of the UK, but we recognise that devolution provides each administration with the powers to decide its own priorities. We will continue to work closely with the devolved administrations to establish common frameworks, where these are necessary, in order to enable the functioning of the UK internal market or so that the UK can negotiate, enter into and implement new trade agreements. Overall, it is the Government’s expectation that the process will lead to an increase in decision-making powers for each of the devolved administrations.

UK farmers and land managers have operated within the constraints of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for decades. While the CAP has pioneered some of the world’s first agri-environment schemes, which have helped to protect our wildlife and habitats, it remains flawed. Paying land owners for the amount of agricultural land they have creates an unjust, inefficient system that can drive perverse outcomes. The bureaucratic structure of the CAP has constrained our ability to deliver genuine improvements to our countryside and natural environment.

We now have an opportunity to transform agricultural policy. Our proposals are underpinned by the ambitions we have set out in the Government’s 25-year environment plan, so that we leave the environment in a better state than we found it for future generations. We want to incentivise methods of farming that improve soil health, create new habitats for wildlife, increase biodiversity, reduce flood risk and better mitigate climate change and improve air quality by reducing agricultural emissions.

Good environmental land management has benefits beyond improving the natural landscape. Human life can be enriched by a deeper connection to our countryside, be it through the air we breathe or access to public footpaths. Farmed animals are also an integral part of our countryside. We have a responsibility to maintain their health and welfare throughout their life and we want to safeguard the welfare of our livestock, building on our existing reputation for world leading standards.

We are proud to have some of the most productive and innovative farmers in the world. Leaving the EU presents a huge opportunity for UK agriculture to increase its competitiveness. This paper proposes various methods by which the industry could achieve this, including developing the next generation of food and farming technology, adopting the latest agronomic techniques, reducing the impact of pests and diseases, investing in skills and equipment, and collaborating with other farmers and processors. We will ensure that in future public money is paid for public goods—principally environmental enhancement, but these could also include improving productivity, providing public access to farmland and the countryside, enhanced welfare standards for livestock and measures to support the resilience of rural and upland communities.

In England, direct payments will continue during an “agricultural transition”. So that we can support farmers to prepare for change, we will need to redistribute some existing funds. To do this, we propose to apply reductions to farmers’ direct payments, starting with the largest landowners, to free up money to pilot environmental land management schemes and to help farmers unlock their full potential for sustainable production.

We recognise that some sectors may find it more difficult than others to adapt—for example, those located in the most remote, wild and beautiful parts of England. The upland way of life, the unique food produced, and the great art and literature that these landscapes have inspired attract visitors from around the world. In this paper, we ask how these rural communities can be supported for new generations and what the right support should be during the transition and into the future.

For the first time in more than 40 years, the UK will also have its own trade policy. We want to maximise our trade opportunities globally and across all countries—both by boosting our trading relationships with old friends and new allies, and by seeking a deep and special partnership with the EU. We are proud to have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. Maintaining and enhancing our high standards of food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection will remain paramount.

We will introduce an Agriculture Bill that moves away from the CAP, providing us with the ability to set out a domestic policy that will stand the test of time.

This consultation marks the exposition of a new settlement for agriculture. As we leave the European Union, this is an historic chance to do something economically sound, socially just, and environmentally essential.

[HCWS488]
The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): New figures published on Thursday 22 February show that the UK is more than halfway towards meeting its commitment to resettle 20,000 people through the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme (VPRS) by 2020.

The latest quarterly Home Office immigration statistics show that 10,538 refugees have been resettled on the VPRS, one of the largest global resettlement programmes, since it began.

The VPRS is just one of the routes by which the UK is helping to resettle refugees. In 2017, a total of 6,212 people were resettled in the UK—a 19% increase on 2016—with 4,832 of these people coming through the VPRS. Five hundred and thirty nine people arrived under the vulnerable children's resettlement scheme (VCRS) which will resettle up to 3,000 at-risk children and their families from the middle east and north Africa region by 2020. The latest figures take the total number of children that the UK has provided asylum or an alternative form of protection to since the start of 2010 to 28,000.

As a country we can be proud that we are over halfway towards honouring our commitment of resettling 20,000 of the most vulnerable refugees who have fled Syria by 2020 so they can rebuild their lives here in safety. Nearly half are children and more people are arriving every month.

The VPRS is a joint scheme between the Home Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The UK’s resettlement schemes are just one of the ways the Government are supporting vulnerable children and adults who have fled danger and conflict. The UK remains the second largest donor in humanitarian assistance and has pledged £2.46 billion in UK aid to Syria and the neighbouring countries, its largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.

[HCWS493]

Independent Police Complaints Commission

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I am pleased to announce that today my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and I are publishing the annual report of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) [HC 798]. Copies of the report have been laid before the House and will be available in the Vote Office.

This is the 13th annual report from the IPCC, covering their work during 2016-17. This period has been pivotal for the IPCC as they prepare for their transition to the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) headed by a director general and unitary board set out in the Policing and Crime Act 2017. They have continued to increase the numbers of independent cases they take on (590) and complete (496) while maintaining the average time to complete cases at around 11 months. A major milestone was reached with the Hillsborough investigation, when following referral to the CPS, six people were subsequently charged.

As well as covering the police, the annual report also includes a section on the discharge of their responsibilities in respect of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs.

[HCWS489]
The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): The creation of the Office for Students (OfS) marks a new era for students as well as higher education regulation. On 20 February, I issued the first annual statement of Government priorities for the OfS under this new regime. This is being published today alongside the publication of the new regulatory framework—a key milestone in the delivery of the programme of reforms set out in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA).

In my letter to the OfS, I set out the following key priorities for the OfS in its first year:

Creating a new regulatory system and ensuring a smooth transition—I have asked the OfS to be bold in operating the new regulatory framework, explicitly supporting diverse, innovative approaches and championing students. A key task in 2018-19 is to register current and new providers ready for full operation of the framework from August 2019, while continuing to operate the existing regulatory arrangements effectively during the transition.

Delivering value for money for the student and taxpayers—In order to ensure that all students receive value for money, I have asked the OfS to work with the sector to protect quality and standards, hold governing bodies to account, improve transparency, and ensure good governance effective and efficient use of resources—including around senior staff remuneration, engaging closely with the sector on its own self-regulation in this area.

Student experience, quality and choice—Students’ interests should be central to the OfS’ mission. I have asked the OfS to work with the sector to promote a positive higher education experience for all students regardless of background.

Freedom of speech—I have asked the OfS to champion and promote freedom of speech, including calling out and challenging attempts to shut down debate such as ‘no platforming’. Free speech is essential in ensuring that higher education exposes students to new and uncomfortable ideas, and encourages robust, civil debate and challenge.

Prevent—I would like the OfS to continue the work HEFCE has previously done to monitor and assess how HE institutions are managing their responsibilities under the statutory Prevent duty, to safeguard students from the risk of radicalisation.

Access and participation—My expectation is that the OfS will work with providers to seek continuous improvement in this area to encourage greater progress.

Industrial strategy and skills—I have asked the OfS to consider how the higher education sector can further support the Government’s broader economic policy as defined by the industrial strategy. Key to this is promoting and enhancing collaboration between the higher education sector and employers, working with Government on reviewing how funding can be used to stimulate this and on reviewing the impact of apprenticeships.

Collaboration with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)—I have asked the OfS to prioritise collaboration with UKRI to ensure a co-ordinated and strategic approach to the funding and regulation of the higher education system in England. This will include OfS leading on the teaching and student elements of the Higher Education Innovation Fund.

Strategic priorities for funding—The OfS’ funding priorities remain broadly consistent with those set for HEFCE in relation to teaching grant in previous years. I have also asked the OfS to support DfE on funding policy issues, including contributing to the review of Post-18 Education and Funding and helping take forward the review’s recommendations.

Developing the OfS—I have also asked the OfS to prioritise developing as an organisation which operates effectively and efficiently, with confidence and independence in regulating the sector, involving students, following the principles of best regulatory practice, and complying with the regulators’ code voluntarily (until this becomes a statutory requirement).

This statement of priorities also covers areas where the Government committed to provide guidance during the passage of HERA, such as on managing risks relating to overseas providers.

Supplementary guidance to the OfS

Alongside this overall statement of Government priorities, I also issued the following supplementary guidance on the 20 February—also being published today.

Priorities for access and participation including access and participation plan guidance—This sets out how the Government expect the OfS to take forward its responsibilities for access and participation and informs the access and participation plan guidance, which the OfS has issued to the higher education sector today.

Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs) and University Title (UT) guidance—This sets out the new high level criteria and processes for DAPs and UT, covering: the different types of DAPs authorisations: eligibility criteria for both DAPs and UT; and revocation and variation actions. The OfS must have regard to this guidance when exercising its functions.

Facilitating electoral registration—This guidance, produced by the Department for Education in collaboration with the Cabinet Office, asks the OfS to encourage providers to promote electoral registration, and help them understand potential challenges and risks that arise as a consequence of registering students.

Alongside the announcement of the review of Post-18 Education and Funding, this guidance and the work of the OfS reflects the Government’s commitment to ensuring that the higher education sector continues to be world leading, improving the opportunities for and outcomes achieved by all students from all backgrounds.

The guidance documents are being published on www.officeforstudents.org.uk/.

[HCWS495]

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Palace of Westminster: Repairs and Maintenance

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Both Houses have decided that the next steps of the restoration and renewal programme should be overseen by a sponsor board and delivery authority. It is expected that the Commission of each House will therefore immediately focus on establishing those bodies in shadow form. Until the shadow sponsor board has been appointed, the programme will continue to be delivered under the governance of the bicameral programme board, which consists of officials from both Houses plus two external members, and acts with authority delegated from the board and accounting officer of each House. Establishing both bodies in substantive form will require primary legislation.

The programme team, supported by its client advisory services consultants, CH2M and BDP, will continue work in the following areas:

Further investigation and documentation of the current physical condition of the Palace of Westminster and its building services.
Further studies on the feasibility of the Queen Elizabeth II conference centre as temporary accommodation for the House of Lords.

Design of Richmond House as temporary accommodation for the House of Commons, which is being taken forward as part of the Commons’ northern estate programme.

Development of a client brief for the design of the works to the Palace of Westminster.

The development of the required outline business cases (OBCs), compliant with HM Treasury’s Green Book.

A further round of medium-term mechanical and electrical, public health and conservation work to mitigate the operational risks to Parliament presented by the condition of the building, between now and the commencement of the construction phase of the R and R programme.

The design phase will require extensive consultation with Members of both Houses, as well as a wide range of other stakeholders including staff, third-party occupants of the parliamentary estate, visitors and other members of society throughout the United Kingdom. It is anticipated that this engagement work will be developed and taken forward by the shadow sponsor board once it is established later this year.

In the meantime, members of the programme team would be happy to receive suggestions and ideas from Members of both Houses. They can be contacted via restorationandrenewal@parliament.uk.

[HCWS496]

JUSTICE

Justice and Home Affairs: Annual Report

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): The Home Office and Ministry of Justice have prepared the eighth annual report to Parliament on the application of protocols 19 and 21 to the treaty on European Union (TEU) and the treaty on the functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (“the treaties”) in relation to EU justice and home affairs (JHA) matters. The report, which is today being laid before the House, is submitted on behalf of both my own Department and that of the Home Secretary.

On 9 June 2008, the then Leader of the House of Lords committed to table a report in Parliament each year setting out the decisions taken by the Government in accordance with protocol 21 (“the justice and home affairs opt-in protocol”) and to make that report available for debate. These commitments were designed to ensure that the views of the scrutiny Committees should inform the Government’s decision-making process.

This report covers decisions taken over the period 1 December 2016 to 30 November 2017. In that period, decisions on UK participation in a total of 19 EU JHA legislative proposals have been taken. The UK has decided to opt in under the JHA opt-in protocol in 12 cases and has decided not to opt in in five cases. The Government have asserted the Schengen opt-out to two proposals during that period—in both cases the Government decided not to opt out (i.e. the UK should participate in the measures).

These opt-in decisions are without prejudice to discussions on the UK’s future relationship with the EU. The UK’s relationship with the EU will change as a result of leaving the EU. However, the UK retains the rights and obligations of membership of the EU while we remain a member.

[HCWS497]
Written Statements

Thursday 1 March 2018

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Data Protection Bill

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has made the following statement under section 19(1)(a) of the Human Rights Act 1998:

In my view, the provisions of the Data Protection Bill are compatible with the convention rights.

[HCWS499]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

EU Environment Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I will attend the EU Environment Council, which takes place on 5 March in Brussels.

Following the adoption of the agenda, the list of “A” items will be approved.

Under non-legislative activities, Council will exchange views on delivering the circular economy action plan, including: a) European strategy for plastics in a circular economy, b) monitoring framework for the circular economy and c) implementation of the circular economy package: options to address the interface between chemical, product and waste legislation.

The following items are currently on the agenda to be considered under “Any Other Business”: Regulation on CO2 standards for cars and vans; Developments regarding shipping and the International Maritime Organisation (IMO); 21st European Forum on Eco-innovation for air quality (Sofia, 5-6 February 2018); Global Pact for the Environment; Implementation of the regulation on invasive alien species.

The UK has additionally tabled an AOB with France calling on the EU and its member states to ban commercial trade in raw ivory within the EU to tackle the current elephant poaching crisis.

Two further AOB items have been added to the agenda on the elimination of deforestation from the supply chain and the 24th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP24, Katowice, 3-14 December 2018).

A lunchtime discussion will then be held on enabling eco-innovation transition towards a circular economy.

Council will conclude with an exchange of views on Greening the European Semester. This will address the integration of environmental considerations of the European Semester with the implementation of environmental policy, linking to the Environmental Implementation Review and Environmental Compliance and Governance Action Plan.

Until the UK leaves the European Union, the UK remains a full member of the EU and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. The outcome of our negotiations with the EU on the future partnership will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future.

[HCWS501]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Today the security service reduced the threat level to Great Britain from Northern Ireland-related terrorism from SUBSTANTIAL to MODERATE. This means that a terrorist attack is possible, but not likely.

The threat level to the UK from international terrorism remains at SEVERE, and the threat level to Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland-related terrorism also remains at SEVERE, meaning that an attack is highly likely.

Threat levels are designed to give a broad indication of the likelihood of a terrorist attack. They are a tool for security practitioners working across different sectors and the police to use in determining what protective security response may be required. They also keep the public informed and give context to the protective security measures which we all encounter in our daily lives.

Despite the change which has been made today, there remains a real and serious threat against the United Kingdom from terrorism and I would ask the public to remain vigilant and to report any suspicious activity to the police regardless of the threat level.

The decision to change this threat level is taken by the security service independently of Ministers and is based on the very latest intelligence, considering factors such as capability, intent and timescale. Threat levels are kept under constant review.

[HCWS500]

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse: Child Migration Programmes

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am pleased to announce that the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse has today published its first regular report, which can be found at www.icsa.org.uk.

This report relates to its child migration programmes case study. The child migration policy was misguided and deeply flawed. Successive Governments have accepted that the policy of child migration was wrong. The 2010 national apology has been reaffirmed in each subsequent year. Over £9 million has been made available to former child migrants to help them be reunited with their families.

Across Government, we look forward to viewing this report and considering how we can respond to its content. Meanwhile I would like to thank Professor Jay
and her Panel for their continued work to uncover the truth, expose what went wrong in the past and to learn the lessons for the future.

[HCWS503]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Grenfell Tower

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In my update to the House on Grenfell Tower and building safety on 18 December 2017, I referred to anxieties about the long-term future of the Grenfell Tower site from those who have been most affected by the terrible events of 14 June 2017.

I set out that the Minister for Grenfell Victims was working with the local community and council to agree a set of written principles that will guide the way forward on decision making for the future of the site. The bereaved, survivors and immediate North Kensington community will lead and be at the heart of the decision-making process.

I am today placing a copy of the agreed principles in the House Library so that our commitments are on the record. I am also placing in the Library a copy of a letter from myself and the Minister for Grenfell Victims to residents offering assurance about ongoing engagement regarding management of Grenfell Tower.

[HCWS498]

PRIME MINISTER

Investigatory Powers: Oversight

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): On 1 September, the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, Lord Justice Fulford took on responsibility for overseeing the use of investigatory powers by public authorities. This was a significant milestone in the transition to new oversight arrangements under the Investigatory Powers Act 2016.

To enable the Investigatory Powers Commissioner to take on additional oversight functions not covered by his statutory responsibilities, I gave two directions to the Commissioner on 22 August 2017. Issuing these directions forms part of our rigorous intelligence oversight system.

One direction instructed the Commissioner to keep under review compliance with the consolidated guidance on detainees by officers of the security and intelligence agencies, and members of the Armed Forces and employees of the Ministry of Defence so far as they are engaged in intelligence activities. The consolidated guidance sets out the standards that personnel must apply during the detention and interviewing of detainees held by others overseas. The other direction instructed the Commissioner to keep under review the application of the security service guidelines on the use of agents who participate in criminality and the authorisations issued in accordance with them. In accordance with my obligation to publish such directions under section 230 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, I am now depositing in the Libraries a copy of both directions.

[HCWS502]
In December 2016, the Taskforce published “Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021” that sets out the Taskforce’s vision for public libraries in England. This is endorsed by central and local government and describes how library services in England support and add value to a range of local and national policy priorities, providing practical examples of existing good practice.

The Government recognise that local authorities are seeking to modernise and innovate library services to ensure they remain relevant and meet the changing demands of their communities. Local authorities are encouraged to work with Government and local people to consider the range of options available to deliver a comprehensive and efficient library service and to ensure that it is sustainable for the long term.

NCC’s Libraries and Information Service seeks to provide a range of community services to local people, including through 36 static libraries, a mobile library service, and other digital services and resources. From 20 October 2017 to 13 January 2018, NCC consulted on three options for the future of its Library and Information Service. The Government understands that NCC has since analysed the consultation responses and recommendations that have been proposed for consideration at NCC cabinet meeting on 13 February and final decision at a full council meeting, as part of its budget-setting process, on 22 February.

Under these recommendations, NCC proposes to retain eight large and seven medium libraries (including Oundle library) in its library service, totalling 15 static libraries, and to develop these as community hubs. NCC also intends to investigate the potential future library service provision for a further location in the Corby area. In addition, the mobile library service would close and, to support library users who find it difficult to access a static library, NCC intends to extend its outreach “Library to You” service.

In relation to the communities served by the remaining 21 libraries currently in its statutory library service but not covered by the above proposals, NCC notes that it will seek to develop a community-managed library model by working with communities to develop business plans for local groups to take over the running of these libraries. To enable a transition to develop such community-managed libraries, NCC proposes to provide continued financial support during 2018-19, and in 2019-20 to pay the rental costs for these libraries. In the event that business plans are not feasible for any library, NCC expects to decide to decommission that library, which is likely to mean it closing.

The Department continues to closely monitor NCC consideration of its libraries proposals. If, following NCC’s final decision about its library service provision, the Department receives a complaint under section 10(1)(a) of the Act raising concerns that NCC will fail to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service, the Department will carefully consider the complaint on its merits to decide whether an inquiry is required to determine if the council is meeting its statutory duty.

It should also be noted that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government announced on 9 January 2018 the appointment of an independent inspector to better understand whether NCC is complying with its “best value” duty—a legal requirement to ensure good governance and effective management of resources. The inspection is due to report by 16 March 2018.
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Urgent treatment centre, Westmorland General Hospital

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom.

Declares that many people in South Lakes have to endure long journeys to the Accident and Emergency units at Royal Lancaster Infirmary in Lancaster and Furness General Hospital in Barrow as the Westmorland General Hospital in Kendal does not have the necessary facilities to cope with the majority of Accident and Emergency cases.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department to bring an Urgent Treatment Centre to Westmorland General Hospital, not only to provide urgent care closer to home for South Lakes residents, but to also help relieve pressure on the Accident and Emergency units at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary and Furness General Hospital and ensure ambulances are not stuck waiting there in long queues.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tim Farron, Official Report, 20 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 1242.]

Observations from the Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay):

Any potential service change is a matter for the local NHS. It is right that these decisions are led by local clinicians, who best understand the healthcare needs of their local population, and in consultation with local people.

All proposed service changes should be based on clear evidence that they will deliver better outcomes for patients.

They should also meet the four tests for service change:

- They should have support from GP commissioners;
- be based on clinical evidence;
- demonstrate public and patient engagement; and
- consider patient choice.

Morecambe Bay Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) has been working closely with NHS England since September 2017, identifying key sites and delivering the operational roll-out for urgent treatment centres across the Morecambe Bay area. The CCG confirms that an urgent treatment centre is planned for the site at Westmorland General Hospital where the Primary Care Assessment Service (PCAS) is currently located. The CCG is working with NHSE on an implementation plan. It is expected that the centre will be operational in Spring 2018.

TRANSPORT

Sudbury Bypass

The petition of residents of the UK.

Declares that the town of Sudbury, Suffolk, has suffered from heavy congestion for too long, hampering the development of the town, causing dangerous levels of pollution and reducing the living standards of its residents; further that the Department for Transport should recognise the strong business case, the support of the Suffolk County Council, the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership and the Haven Gateway Partnership; and further the Government should provide support for the construction of a Sudbury bypass, including any necessary funding, to improve the future of the town and surrounding areas; and further that a local paper petition and online petition on this matter received 3,711 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Transport to support the construction of a Sudbury bypass.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by James Cartlidge, Official Report, 31 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 940.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

The Government have an ambitious strategy for tackling congestion across the country. This includes significant new investment in both the strategic and local road networks, as well as encouragement for more sustainable transport including buses, walking and cycling.

The Department for Transport understands traffic congestion can be experienced at certain times in the centre of Sudbury, along with air quality issues in the town. The Department would urge all local partners to work together in looking for viable transport solutions to these issues.

Any new bypass at Sudbury would be a local transport project and therefore a matter for the local highway authority, Suffolk County Council, to take forward including setting out how they plan to fund the scheme.

Government funding for such schemes on the local highways network is currently provided through the Local Growth Fund (LGF). In line with the Government’s commitment to devolution, all LGF funding up to March 2021 has been devolved to Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to administer in line with locally identified priorities. If Suffolk County Council wish to seek LGF funding for a new bypass they should therefore look to the New Anglia LEP. The future of such funding after 2021 is still under discussion.

The A134 through Sudbury is on the Government’s proposed Major Road Network (MRN) which is out for consultation until 19 March 2018. Should it be designated as part of the MRN then this scheme could be eligible for MRN funding in the future.

Toft Hill Bypass

The petition of residents of Toft Hill,

Declares that the A68 that runs through Toft Hill is unsuitable and unsafe for the volume and nature of vehicles, especially HGV Lorries; and further that the proximity of the primary school and proposed future development in the village would make this stretch of road more dangerous to local residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Transport to priorities a new relief road to alleviate the problems faced by residents of Toft Hill.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Helen Goodman, Official Report, 23 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 238.]
Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

The Government have provided significant amounts of funding for local road improvements, including the Department for Transport’s £475 million Local Major Schemes Fund and the £12 billion Local Growth Fund available to Local Enterprise Partnerships. Both of these funds can be accessed by local authorities for road improvements such as bypasses, but before applying the local authorities are expected to undertake the initial development of a business case to show the scheme is feasible and offers value for money.

The A68 through Toft Hill forms part of the local road network, which, in this location, is the responsibility of Durham County Council. As such, it would be for Durham County Council to decide if the road is unsuitable and unsafe for the volume of traffic it carries and whether a business case should be developed.

The Department for Transport intends to create a Major Road Network to tackle bottlenecks and traffic jams on the country’s busiest “A” roads. This will see up to £100 million available for individual enhancement schemes on the new network. Improvements on the Major Road Network will be funded from the National Roads Fund, which from 2020 will be paid for by Vehicle Excise Duty.

A consultation on the creation of this Major Road Network is currently under way and closes on 19 March 2018. The consultation sets out proposals for defining the new network, how investments will be planned, and how proposed investments will be assessed. The A68 through Toft Hill is not included in the indicative Major Road Network, which was published alongside the consultation, as it does not meet the proposed criteria for Major Roads. However, the purpose of the consultation is to gather views on the Department’s proposals and, if stakeholders feel there be made for the A68, they should respond to the consultation.

TREASURY

Closure of RBS branches in East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow

The petition of residents of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow.

Declares that closure of the RBS branches in Lesmahagow and Strathaven, and indeed many other rural branches across Scotland, unfairly affects rural communities that will have to travel further to withdraw their own money or seek monetary advice from their own bank; further that RBS is 72%-owned by taxpayer and rural taxpayers have been unfairly targeted in the closures; further that it could be of serious detriment to our local rural economies; and further that the closure of these local branches will have the biggest negative impact on the most vulnerable people in our community such as the elderly and the disabled.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government, as a major shareholder in RBS, to undertake a full review into the decision by the bank to close a third of its branches in Scotland; further that the government acknowledges the targeted impact this will have on rural communities; and further that the Government will urge RBS to rethink its list of proposed branch closures.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr Lisa Cameron, Official Report, 20 December 2017, Vol. 633, c. 1242.]

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The Government thank Lisa Cameron MP for her petition on the closure of the RBS branches in Lesmahagow and Strathaven.

The Government are sorry to hear about the disappointment of the residents of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow at the closure of the RBS branches.

As with other banking service providers, RBS Group will need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering its strategy. Decisions on opening and closing branches and agencies are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis. The Government’s stake in RBS is managed at arm’s length by UK Financial Investments (UKFI). UKFI is wholly owned by the Government and is responsible for managing the Government’s stake in the assets acquired during the financial crisis. UKFI is not responsible, however, for managing the assets themselves. RBS retains its own board, which is responsible for strategic and management decisions and decisions relating to branch closures are solely within the remit of the bank.

However, the Government do believe that banks should act in the best interests of their customers and are committed to increasing competition to deliver better financial products and services for all bank customers. The Government continue to engage actively with the banking industry and consumer groups on these issues on an ongoing basis.

In May 2017, the major high street banks signed up to the Access to Banking Standard, committing to work with customers and communities to minimise the impact of branch closures and put in place alternative banking services. The Standard commits banks to ensure customers are well informed about branch closures, the bank’s reasons for closure and options for continued access to banking services. These options should include specialist assistance for customers who need more help. The operation of the Standard is monitored and enforced by the independent Lending Standards Board, ensuring that banks are held accountable for the way they treat their customers when a branch closes.

In addition, in January 2017, the Post Office announced that it had reached an agreement with the banks that will allow more banking customers to access a wider range of services at the Post Office than ever before. The new arrangement allows individual and small business customers to withdraw money, deposit cash and cheques and check balances at more than 11,600 Post Office branches in the UK. While the range of services offered by the Post Office may be more limited than that offered in a traditional bank branch, the services provided through the Post Office’s extensive network ensures that essential banking facilities remain available in as many communities as possible. The Post Office estimates that 99% of personal and 95% of business customers will be able to carry out their day-to-day banking at a Post Office as a result of the new agreement.
Both initiatives have the Government’s full support, and banks are aware that the Government expect their involvement to be genuine and unqualified.

Should the residents of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow decide to switch banks, the Government have made it easier than ever before using the Current Account Switch Service (CASS). The switch service is free to use, comes with a guarantee to protect customers from financial loss if something goes wrong, and redirects any payments mistakenly sent to the old account, providing further assurance for customers. This means that customers are more able than ever to hold their banks to account by voting with their feet, and that banks are incentivised to work hard to retain their existing customers and attract new ones. More information about CASS is available at: www.currentaccountswitch.co.uk

The Government cannot reverse the changes in the market and in customer behaviour; nor can it determine firms’ commercial strategies in response to those changes.

However, the Government will continue to take positive action to maintain access to vital banking services and ensure that banks support communities across the UK when their local branches close.
Petition

Friday 23 February 2018

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Family re-unification for refugee children: St Patricks Primary, Troon and Symington Primary

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Government must do more to protect the rights of refugee children, in particular their right to protection and to be reunited with their family in the United Kingdom; and further that it is vital that the law is altered to recognised the broader range of individuals as family, and that in addition to parents, children’s siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents are also acknowledged as family members.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to extend the current definition of family relation to unaccompanied child refugees entering the United Kingdom; and further that it is vital that the law is altered to recognised the broader range of individuals as family, and that in addition to parents, children’s siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents are also acknowledged as family members.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr Philippa Whitford, Official Report, 24 January 2018; Vol. 365, c. 376.]

Observations from the Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes):

In considering the request to broaden the definition of family members for refugee family reunion, the Government have noted the concerns of both parliamentarians and members of the public about this issue. This is a complex area and the Government are keen to ensure that we do not create unintended consequences through the widening of the current definition of family members.

The Government have noted the call for refugee children to be able to sponsor their family members. Children who claim asylum here will be offered protection where they need it but there is a good reason why they cannot sponsor relatives to join them. Allowing children to sponsor other relatives would create incentives for them to be encouraged, or even forced, to leave their family and risk hazardous journeys to the UK to sponsor relatives.

But it is important that we note the very significant contribution the Government have made, not only in recent years, to support the global migration challenges. The UK is one of the leading contributors to the Syrian conflict, pledging £2.46 billion of aid to date and a further £175 million to the Mediterranean migration crisis. This support has provided life-saving assistance, including protection for the most vulnerable migrants and refugees and helped build capacity of host Governments to manage migration so that it is safe and orderly. The significant support the Government have provided in the regions means that families do not need to become separated.

By the end of 2016 our assistance delivered:

1.5 million relief items to people affected by the Mediterranean migration crisis;

More than 1.9 million meals for vulnerable refugees and migrants in Europe;

Over 1.6 million emergency interventions such as psychosocial support for refugees and migrants travelling to and within Europe.

Furthermore, by 2020 we will have resettled 20,000 refugees from Syria and a further 3,000 children and families from the wider MENA. This is in addition to the 18,427 refugees resettled under our resettlement programmes since 2004, and the 24,000 family reunion visas issued for refugees and 43,727 people provided with protection status in the UK since 2010 who are entitled to apply for their qualifying family members to join them.

The Government’s objective is to ensure that our policies support those in greatest need of our protection, who cannot remain in their country or region of origin. Extending the definition would go far beyond those in conflict regions or dangerous situations and could lead to this policy being used by significantly more people—who have no protection needs or who are not necessarily in precarious positions.

This Government strongly support the principle of family unity. We therefore have a comprehensive approach to refugee family reunion which is set out in the Immigration Rules and our family reunion policy. This policy reflects a decision-making framework that includes discretion and compelling circumstances. Additionally, there are clear Rules for non-refugees who look to bring non-EEA spouses and dependants. Officials regularly review and monitor the operation of existing policies.

Those recognised by UNHCR as refugees may also be able to join close family members here in the UK through the existing Gateway and Mandate refugee schemes. We need to ensure existing schemes are used to full effect to benefit family members living in regions of conflict and the Government continue to work with NGOs on the application of the current rules and the approach as part of our wider asylum and resettlement strategy.

Taking these factors into account, the Government continue to believe that the current definition of family member for the purposes of refugee family reunion set within a comprehensive framework providing safe and legal routes for families to reunite here already exists and should not be extended or defined further by primary legislation.
Petition

Monday 26 February 2018

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Public sector workers

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that public sector services such as the NHS are running out of people resources and good will; further that the years of frozen pay, followed by a 1% pay rise-reluctantly given by this Government three years ago and initially tied with restrictions, is an insult; further that there is a rise of public sector workers having to turn to foodbanks due to the Government’s policies; and further that many are leaving their jobs as they cannot afford to live on their pay.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to recognise the worth of public sector workers and recognise the financial losses that have been incurred.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sandy Martin.]

[P002115]
Ministerial Corrections

*Tuesday 20 February 2018*

**EDUCATION**

**Autism: Educational Outcomes**

*The following is an extract from the Adjournment debate on Autism: Educational Outcomes on 6 February 2018:*

Melanie Onn: Can the Minister tell us how long it takes between a school identifying that a child has an issue and that child receiving the intervention and support that they require? In too many areas throughout the country, it is taking far too long.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. In my speech, I will go on to address some of the issues—not just the Prime Minister’s review, but the Lenehan review and the Bercow work as well. We are looking very seriously at this matter, and the impetus from the Prime Minister and No.10 is only helping us to focus even more on making sure that we get this review right.

**TREASURY**


*The following is an extract from the First Delegated Legislation Committee debate on the Local Government Finance Act 1998 (Non-Domestic Rating Multipliers) (England) Order 2017:*

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Member for Oxford East for her contribution and for welcoming the measures, albeit that she did caveat her remarks fairly heavily. She asserted that the Government are not doing enough, but bringing forward the change to the revaluation approach by two years is a £2.3 billion move. [Official Report, 29 January 2018, First Delegated Legislation Committee, c. 6.]

**Letter of correction from Nadhim Zahawi:**

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn).

The correct response should have been:

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Member for Oxford East for her contribution and for welcoming the measures, albeit that she did caveat her remarks fairly heavily. She asserted that the Government are not doing enough, but bringing forward the change to the indexation approach by two years is a £2.3 billion move.
Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 21 February 2018

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Aid Sector: Safeguarding

The following is an extract from the statement entitled Aid Sector: Safeguarding on Tuesday 20 February 2018.

Penny Mordaunt: DFID, other Government Departments and the National Crime Agency work closely together when serious allegations of potentially criminal activity in partner organisations are brought to our attention. We are strengthening this work, as the new strategy director at the NCA will take on a lead role for the aid sector. [Official Report, 20 February 2018, Vol. 636, c. 47.]

Letter of correction from Penny Mordaunt:
An error has been identified in my statement.
The correct wording should have been:

Penny Mordaunt: DFID, other Government Departments and the National Crime Agency work closely together when serious allegations of potentially criminal activity in partner organisations are brought to our attention. We are strengthening this work.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Turkey (Afrin)

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on Tuesday 20 February 2018.

Grahame Morris: Does the Foreign Secretary recognise that the Kurdish-led Administration in Afrin has built a secular, democratic system that has worked collaboratively with the international community to defeat Daesh, most recently in Raqqa? Does he accept that the international community owes a debt of honour to the Kurds? Will he step up efforts to stop the bloodshed in and around Afrin?

Sir Alan Duncan: I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but we must also recognise Turkey’s legitimate security interests in Syria. They consider that, having launched Operation Olive Branch in January, it is in response to attacks from the Afrin area, and they believe that they are in compliance with proper UN standards. [Official Report, 20 February 2018, Vol. 636, c. 2.]

Letter of correction from Sir Alan Duncan:
An error has been identified in my answer to the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris).
The correct response should have been:

Sir Alan Duncan: I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but we must also recognise Turkey’s legitimate security interests in Syria. They consider that, having launched Operation Olive Branch in January, it is in response to attacks from the Afrin area, and they believe that they are in compliance with proper UN standards.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 1 March 2018

TREASURY
Topical Questions

The following is an extract from an answer given by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) during Topical Questions to Treasury Ministers on 27 February 2018:

Sir Hugo Swire: Reducing tourism VAT to 5% after we leave the European Union would create an extra 121,000 jobs and £4.6 billion in revenue to the Treasury over 10 years. It would be a great boost not only to our great cities, but to our great coastal towns, such as Exmouth, Sidmouth and Budleigh Salterton in my East Devon constituency. Will the Chancellor commit to looking again at this issue as we leave the EU?

Mr Hammond: My right hon. Friend is nothing if not persistent and consistent. I cannot remember how many times he has raised this issue. There have been numerous requests for new VAT reliefs since the referendum, some of which are currently not permitted under EU law. We have calculated that if we were to grant all the VAT relief requests that we have received, that would come to more than £38 billion a year. On VAT and tourism, the Government have received representations on this issue, and we are looking again at the case for change. We have issued a call for evidence on the impact of VAT and air passenger duty on tourism in Northern Ireland, and we will certainly keep this issue under careful review. [Official Report, 27 February 2018, Vol. 636, c. 678.]

Letter of correction from Mr Hammond:

An error has been identified in the Oral Answer given to the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) at Treasury Topical Questions on 27 February 2018. The correct answer should have been:

Mr Hammond: My right hon. Friend is nothing if not persistent and consistent. I cannot remember how many times he has raised this issue. There have been numerous requests for new VAT reliefs since the referendum, some of which are currently not permitted under EU law. We have calculated that if we were to grant all the VAT relief requests that we have received, that would come to more than £38 billion a year. On VAT and tourism, the Government have received representations on this issue, and we are looking again at the case for change. We will publish a call for evidence on the impact of VAT and air passenger duty on tourism in Northern Ireland, and we will certainly keep this issue under careful review.